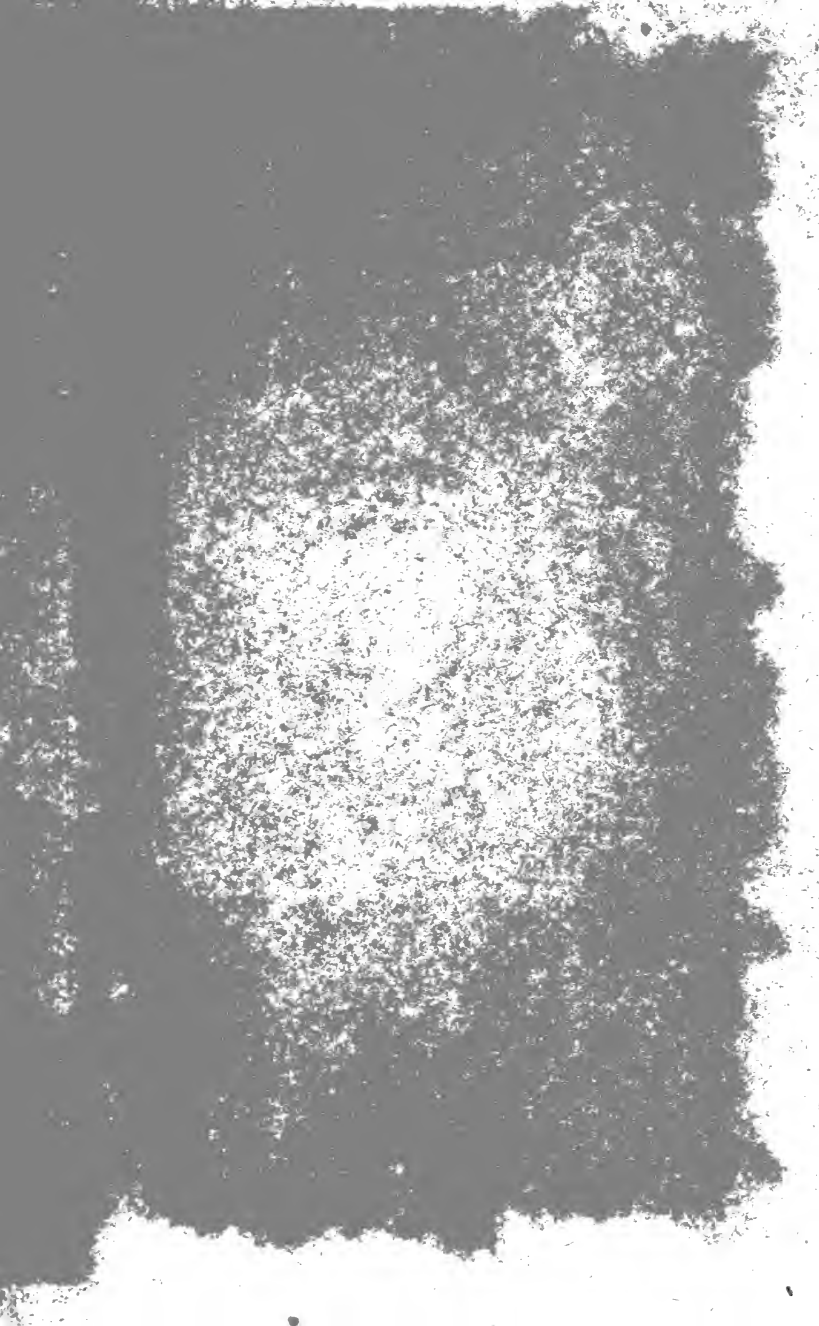


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A W A K I N G.

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A W A K I N G.

"Ne'er was a dream so like a waking."

Shakespeare.

BY

MRS. JOHN KENT SPENDER

AUTHOR OF

"MR. NOBODY," — "GODWYN'S ORDEAL," — "BOTH IN THE WRONG," — "HER OWN
FAULT," — "KEPT SECRET," — "LADY HAZLETON'S CONFESSION,"

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS.

VOLUME III.

BOOK II (*contnd*).

CHAPTER.	PAGE.
IX. AN UNEXPECTED RESOLUTION	I
X. HAD SHE GONE MAD?	26
XI. TAKING REFUGE	41
XII. ONE OF THE WORKING WOMEN. . . .	62
XIII. WAS IT A DREAM?	79
XIV. THE PICTURE	97
XV. THE RETURN OF AN OLD FRIEND . . .	110
XVI. "WE CAN NEVER SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN".	133
XVII. THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION	146
XVIII. GEORGE LAYTON VISITS THE STUDIO .	164
XIX. "FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE"	192

A WAKING.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED RESOLUTION.

IT was afternoon when Zina returned to her home, and even then she did not enter the house, but sought a sequestered part of the garden, a neglected part of the shrubbery which was called the "wilderness," to make an attempt to collect her thoughts. She had need to make the attempt, for it seemed to her as if she had been brought in contact with unutterable horrors, and ill-omened shapes of

evil—as if she had suddenly awakened to the knowledge of a darkness which could never again be irradiated for her.

It was the latter part of April, and in the coppice amongst the underwood, primroses and violets were already blowing. The chestnuts were unfolding their sticky sheaths, and a delicate veil of green, foretelling the coming foliage, was shimmering over birch and beech in the more open spaces.

But Zina, lover as she was of the Spring, saw nothing of this—neither did she feel the rain which was falling on her unprotected face. It was as if she had spent hundreds of years in the last few hours and could never feel young again.

Everything around her was in bud with fulfilment of promise, though the promises of her own future could never now be fulfilled. In the dark bedroom of that cottage a new

and sudden light had flashed upon her in which she was able to piece together trifles which had staggered her more than once in the past; trifles which she had attempted to reason away but which she now saw to have fatally indicated character.

It was as if she had suddenly found a clue to all that had puzzled her; the veil had been torn away against her will; she wished with a groan that it had been possible to swathe herself in it again. For the light was hideous as well as blinding; every atom of evidence pointing to a conclusion which was incontrovertible, every inference in the past burning itself into her mind.

Still there was just a hope that George Layton would be able to justify himself.

After a time he sought her; he had been seeking her since lunch in every room of the

house and in every corner of the garden.

She had known that the interview with him must come sooner or later, and though the thought of meeting him was a thought to make her cringe with terror, brave as she usually was, she could not help remembering with a bitter sense of humour that now it was *her* turn to resent the intrusion on *her* privacy.

She had come to the "wilderness" with the idea of collecting her thoughts but she had known that sooner or later he would seek her.

She stood at a little distance as if she dreaded his personal proximity. She had always shrunk from men of this sort with physical repugnance, a sort of loathing which made her feel it impossible to touch them; and she now awoke to all the horror of her position; for her ideas of wifely devotion were exalted, and one of these men was her—*husband* !

For the first time in her life she was ashamed, with a deeper shame for his sake—a shame which made her hate to lift her eyes to his face.

“Where have you been all this time? People have been asking after you,” he said as he watched her standing aside in this eccentric fashion, looking pale and pinched, no doubt from hunger and fatigue.

The rain was falling on her hair and face, but she did not heed it.

“Zina, did you not know that it was very odd of you—almost rude—to absent yourself like this?”

When she assented, it was absently, the sound of her own name sending the blood rushing to her face.

But when he took a step forward she turned from him abruptly, and then he saw that she was trembling violently, though all her attention

seemed to be concentrated in struggling to button a refractory glove.

"You admit that you *did* know it; really your conduct is *most* eccentric," he repeated, still advancing as he spoke.

He was smoking as usual, and when she put out her hand as if she would keep him back he tried to interpret her action by a woman's objection to smoke.

Yet she had never objected in this way before, and he began to think he understood it all. His refusal on a former occasion to answer her question had probably led to some foolish gossip.

The new sort of repugnance, the strung-up nerves, and the morbid horror in her face could have but one explanation, and he cursed the mischief-makers in his heart, whilst he congratulated himself that as he had changed all his servants at the time of his marriage the gossip

must have been kept within bounds and could do no great harm. It would be easy to contradict it.

“What nonsense this is! You look as if you had been worrying yourself again. Leave meddling and worrying to narrow-minded folk—It is not as if you were jealous, but you are not perfectly exempt from another fault of your sex. All women have been *curious* since the days of Eve,” he said disingenuously; for though there was a certain amount of truth in the platitudes easy of utterance he knew that they did not meet the case.

He prided himself on keeping his temper under terrible provocation, and on determining not to allow any expression of annoyance to escape him.

“So long as you don’t overdo the Lady Bountiful by making the villagers discontented

and grasping, there is no objection to your taking a lonely walk, though the ramble should be within reasonable bounds; you look tired and worn-out."

Till then she had been trying to survey the facts impartially and to believe him innocent till the charge was proved against him. But now her heart fainted within her, for he himself had betrayed his discomfort, and the time to put him to the test was coming, even sooner than she had anticipated.

"I *have* been to the village," she said, "and I have had a very good reason for absenting myself from lunch, for I have been sitting with a dying woman who needed me much more than anyone else could need me."

Even now she hesitated and found it difficult to go on.

Her natural shrinking from those hectic subjects

which she had hitherto refused to touch—subjects which had never been discussed even at her father's table, but which in deference to her modesty had been covered with many veils, hidden away, decently buried, or only allowed to flaunt their unhallowed heads in disreputable corners of the earth—came upon her in its old force.

Then she took courage and obliged herself to continue:

“Oh, if *you* had seen the sight you would be unable to forget it—the woful eyes, haggard and wild, heavy and large, which only could speak the reproaches her voice refused to utter. When I left her she had relapsed into a state of unconsciousness; but oh! I am thankful that I stayed so long, and still more thankful to think that before the morning the Angel of Death will release her from her misery.

Death is better than life for her, and perhaps, also, for *me*."

Her voice betrayed no emotion; her face, on which the rain was still falling, wore a look as if the feeling had been forced in and a door had been shut on it.

"The name of the dying woman is Agnes Morton," she continued, in the same level tone, "her sister Daisy wrote to ask me to come and see her."

And then she stood watching him with her fingers interlaced, wrung together till the pressure of the nails seemed to injure the delicate flesh in spite of the gloves she wore, staring at him, as he remembered afterwards, with wide-orbed eyes.

The hardening of his face as her steady eyes seemed to penetrate him, and the ashy change in his complexion, as, throwing away

his cigar and stamping on it in his fury, he uttered an oath beneath his breath, confirmed her horrible dread.

Her heart stood still, and she gave a little cry—a cry which was strangled in its utterance—as she felt that the question which she had been so fearful of asking had already been answered.

To have the last hope destroyed with which she had fondly deluded herself was too much for the equanimity which she had hoped to be able to keep up, and she threw up her hands with a sudden impulse—an impulse of despair.

“Then you brought me here,” she said, in a voice hoarse with excitement, “for *what?* To humiliate me to the dust?”

The blushes on her face seemed to sting it. Yet her words goaded him; he paced the path impatiently as if he would escape from a scourge.

But she continued, more to herself than to him, "Till this moment I had hoped it would prove to be false—I had hoped against hope even when I left the cottage. But I see now there is no getting out of the circumstantial evidence which hems you in like an iron circle—no denying these overwhelming proofs of your guilt."

Again her face stung; she stooped to hide it from his gaze.

He turned and faced her, "I did not know you were so absurd; you must learn to control this wildness. You are not an innocent, and you ought to understand these things. I could not have married a little innocent like the majority of girls. If the woman you have just seen had not been unreasonable she would have had nothing to complain of; she——"

"Oh, George!" she interrupted, passionately,

“it is a poor compliment you pay me if you think——”

“My dear, I think nothing that you do not want me to think. Let us talk it out like sensible beings. It is the habit of some men to treat women in a tender, patronising manner, as if they were helpless infants and knew nothing about the world, and it is the notion of the majority of women to assume this helpless innocence; but you and I have never kept up this pretty little fiction.

“You have never pretended to go to church, say your prayers, and all the rest of it; whilst on the other hand you have read largely, browsed, as Charles Lamb would call it, on all sorts of literature—and excuse me if I say that I naturally expected you would view these things in a larger, more comprehensive way than a sulky schoolgirl.”

"Your joke and your joking is in the worst of taste," she cried in an agonised voice, which shewed him, somewhat to his surprise, that he was outraging and offending all that was delicate in her nature.

But she did not argue further. The subject had always seemed to her one of those which were undebatable, and she had no idea of exhausting her power of persuasion, or hiding her feeling of repulsion.

The fierce anger which glittered in her eyes and sounded in her hard, deep breathing roused him as perhaps nothing else could have done.

Never before had he seen that luminous intensity in any woman's face; he admired but was not touched by it.

"You need not turn on me with your eyes gleaming like a fury's, and make all

sorts of wild accusations," he said, and her anger was succeeded by a great shock of pain.

The change of things had been so tremendous from the seventh Heaven to the lowest Hell during the last few months that it made her forget her usual self-control.

The half-truths, sharper than lies, by which he had tried to excuse himself, had struck like arrows to her heart. And yet she had sense enough to remember that her passion lowered her; others had suffered the same reverses before, and had suffered them with more or less self-control, and she made an effort to conquer her emotion.

An excruciating agony, as if something had suddenly snapped in the machinery of her brain, or as if the blood which went to her heart had been hindered in its flow, kept

her speechless for a moment or two, gasping as if for breath.

Then she said in the emotionless voice which she had forced herself to use at the beginning of the interview:

“You asked me to talk like a sensible being, and I will try to do so. I have nothing more to do with the past, but I have to face the future.

“My conduct must be guided by circumstances, and those circumstances it has become necessary for me to know.

“You married Agnes Morton under false pretences.

“Hear me speak,” she said calmly, as he tried to interrupt her; “it is not necessary for you to explain that you did not *really* marry her—I am coming to that presently, and our opinions may differ about it—it suf-

fices for what I want to say that you *pretended* to marry her, and that you tried to play the same trick upon me.

“I asked you once before, when my temper got the better of me, and when I did not really think it, if that anonymous warning had not been sent to me would you have brought me to a state like *that*?

“You said *then*—O how clearly I remember—that it was not possible you could deceive *me, or any other woman who confided in you.* What about this woman and her childlike confidence?

“Knowing her story as I do now, I ask you once again, slowly and deliberately, if that letter had not been sent should I not have been now in the same position as that unfortunate?”

They looked at each other for a space of

time which seemed to each of them interminable; in reality it would have been scarcely appreciable to an outsider.

Her bosom rose and fell, her deeply heaved sighs told of her distress, but having determined to strike home and not to flinch, she never removed her eyes from his face.

He tried to return her glance indifferently as if he himself had been an outsider, and had nothing to do with her unfounded suspicions. Then he dropped his eyelids and shifted his feet.

In such moments our senses are miraculously sharpened, and she was aware of a little impatient movement of his hands, never averting her gaze till he again lifted his eyes, unconscious of a scarcely noticeable tremor of the lip, and tried to reassure her by a smile, as he said:

"I am not a lawyer; how could you expect me to be up in all the ins and outs of Swiss law?"

It was one more of those half-truths which involve a falsehood: a direct lie would have been less painful to her.

She had braced herself to bear the sharpest twinge of agony.

"It will be quick," she had said to herself, "it will be soon over, but I must bear it," and now she was thrown back on one of his old attempts to trifle with her.

After all that had happened he could look at her with a self-satisfied attempt at a smile, and try to deceive her still with one of those juggleries which a clever man, priding himself on his sleight of hand, can so often practise successfully on a woman who blindly trusts him.

She hated him at that moment. Heaven knew

that he was far enough from laughing in his secret heart, but what was there in his mood which made the smile break into a nervous laugh, meant to be good-tempered and indulgent of her whims? The laugh grated on her nerves, and increased her feeling of aversion; in her highly-wrought state it suggested more than he had said.

“You joke,” she repeated bitterly. “Louis XV. joked the day when the Pompadour’s funeral passed by his window. He said she had bad weather. It is bad weather with me now, and what is it with your first wife, who is dying like a beggar?”

“All this is a little fantastic, you know. Am I responsible for the wild fancies of a poor woman who is dying, cursed with a fever-stricken, morbid imagination? Before giving vent to language which is so excitable and grotesque,

and which is difficult for me to forgive, don't you think it would be better to trust your husband a little more?"

He had recovered himself now, and stood surveying her with folded arms.

Never had his admiration for her been greater. He took in all the "points" as he stood watching her, the supple figure, the clear investigating eyes, and the air of perfect finish even at a moment like this.

He had suffered much in the interview but reflected with a feeling of triumph that the odds of such a contest between a man and his wife were always on the side of the man.

His smile had even become a little patronising as he continued, almost pityingly, "My dear child, you are what the Americans would call 'high falutin.'"

Again the words were ready to rush forth

like a torrent from her lips, and again she controlled herself. If he did not understand—if his nature was so entirely alien from hers—of what use would it be to try and make him understand? Still it was her duty to make one more effort.

“It is really of little consequence so far as *I* am concerned. You formed a union before you married me, and you were bound by that tie as long as the woman lived; under no pretext whatever could you violate it; so that the ceremony you went through with me did not really amount to much.”

“You are raving,” he said, “and your raving is only injurious to yourself.”

“I do not think so,” she continued coldly and clearly. “The position of *myself* has really nothing to do with it, except that I wanted to find out whether you meditated putting the

same indignity upon another woman which you had already put upon one.

“I do not recognise one law for the woman and another for the man; such a social system is absurd and wrong. I never pretended to be much of a Christian, but I understand the principles of Christianity just as they were written, and so far as the moral code goes I agree with it—a moral ideal which demands everything or nothing. Each man one wife and each woman one husband, and never to forsake each other under any pretext whatever.”

Again, he did not wish to lose his temper, but it seemed to him that a sort of madness had seized hold of his wife. “This is childish,” he repeated, “and just the sort of childishness which I should not have expected from you.”

It was not only that all remnant of her love had been killed in an hour or two, so that there

was no possibility of reviving it; not only was it evident from her white, drawn face that she had suffered as much as it was possible for a human being to suffer, but that she was reasoning against her own position as an honourable woman in society. He had learnt to value her, and he could not bear it.

“You left Agnes Morton to bear the consequences of your sin; it was base, cowardly, and cruel,” she continued in the same voice. “If it had not been for my wedding you would have left me too. I have to thank what some people would call a lucky accident for the difference between us, but I do not wish to accept that difference.”

He stared in astonishment. “But *she*—the case *is* utterly different,” he began; “you cannot know what you are saying.”

“Oh, don’t bring that up against her! *You*

should be the last to say so. The world is brutally hard in the case of the woman, while it condones lots of evil in a man. Now that I have placed myself on a par with her, you cannot speak lightly of her without also speaking lightly of me. I am not your wife as truly as she is."

CHAPTER X.

HAD SHE GONE MAD?

LAYTON really believed that Zina had gone mad, talking in that sort of way like a second-rate actress who is miserably aware of her own failure to move the feelings of her auditors.

Alarmed as he was at all that she had said—speaking with that dreadful effort, and her face wrung with woe—it had little or no effect upon his finer feelings.

“What does all this mean?” he asked, strung at another device and trying to speak sternly.

"It means that you did me the greatest wrong a man can do a woman."

"You—my wedded wife?"

"You had no right to pretend to marry me; you were married already to that poor creature."

Once more he had recourse to equivocation, but he saw that she did not believe him. It was impossible any longer to ignore the repulsion in her face, or the accusations which she made in that dull and toneless voice, with all the music gone out of it.

"If you were what they call a religious woman I should say you were a cold, hard Pharisee. It is the way with pretended Christians—they push a man out into the darkness—but *you*, you never made pretensions of that sort."

And then finding that she looked as if she did not hear him, but made as though she were drawing figures on the gravel with her umbrella,

which she never thought of putting up to protect her from the rain, he tried his former plan of assuming a tone of quiet authority.

"Listen to me," he urged, "you are tired and out of sorts and not accountable for what you are saying. These remarks may be sentimental and interesting, but you women want training in logic, and it seems to me they are not to the point. To-morrow morning, when you have slept upon it, you will admit that they are overstrained. Come into the house and take some food like a reasonable being; it is dreadful to see you in this miserable plight."

He tried to take her hand, but she drew it from him; it was as cold as ice. "I am sorry you are unhappy too," she said as she drew it away; "but you have brought it on yourself, and you cannot be more wretchedly unhappy than I am."

"You are a strange woman; I know that once you loved me," he said as he bent over her and once more tried to assert his right of property in her.

The light in her eyes shot through him. It was the supreme crisis. His whole being was thrilled with agony, as the revelation that she was lost to him stabbed him to the heart. He tried to smile, but she heard the sound of his quickening breath and saw that the beads of perspiration were standing on his forehead.

"Do not dare to touch me—do not venture to draw near to me," she cried beneath her breath, and the sob which forced itself from her seemed to be too much for the delicate framework of her body—it shook her as a reed is shaken by the wind.

Then she walked of her own accord into the house—walked slowly and with a steadier step than usual.

Her face was set, as if it had been carved out of stone, and he was terrified for the consequences when he caught sight of it, scarcely knowing which he most feared, a violent outbreak, or that forced calmness in her voice which was still more terrible.

He drew a deep sigh of relief when she appeared again in the evening, for he saw that she was making an effort to keep her nerves under control, and that she would act better in the emergency than he could have expected of her.

Thank heaven, there would be no scene; he need not have dreaded it, for she said nothing of what had passed, but joined as usual in the conversation, not wincing when his eyes fell on her as she sat at the head of the table, and then sailed out with the other smiling ladies.

The *badinage*, the light jests, the graceful

marshalling of her guests took him by surprise. He did not know that she heard their voices as if in a dream, and that when she accompanied them into the drawing-room she continued to see everything like the shifting scenes on a stage, or the visions of a trance.

There was an expression in her face which held him spellbound as he saw her acquiescing in every arrangement, and heard her talking as usual on every subject—even on politics, which did not interest her in the least.

Once or twice she even made a random shot, and on another occasion he would have laughed back, "My dear, that is not like you, when you pride yourself on your exactitude."

But now he was quick to take her cue. And always scrupulously polite to his wife, and attentive to all that she said in company,

he was, if anything, more polite than ever.

It might almost have seemed as if she had decided to anticipate gossip, and had determined that there should be a general consensus of opinion in his favour, so deferentially did she appeal to him that evening, and so anxious did she appear to convey the opinion that their marriage had been a success, running into one of the marked types of the marriage of like to like.

And George, who was one of the men used to popularity and accustomed to female adoration took the deference—to all appearances—pleasantly.

When the evening was over, she awoke as if from a trance, creeping into her own room as into a corner, like some wounded animal, to hide the shame for which she was not responsible, but which made her feel as guilty as if she had taken part in it.

Her sorrow included sorrow for all the women who had been mistaken, and who wished that they could have been duped again into that state of ignorant bliss in which they had at one time lived.

Was it possible it had never dawned upon George that their relationship had been hopelessly changed by the discovery, and that she must take refuge somewhere. The question was *where?*

She thought of the cowardly soldier who had been praised for his courage in not running away at the battle of Waterloo, and who had answered stolidly, "Where was we to run to?"

Rack her brains as she might, she could think of on one with whom she could take refuge, but Mary Carruthers—Mary who was now a widow, but logical and unselfish in the motherly recognition that the needs of the living were greater than those of the dead.

How Zina wished now that she had not sneered at the idea of the professor giving up his "will to live," and how she despised herself for having despised the poverty of Mary's home.

Warmth and comfort were pleasant, but Zina had never been one of those who could long be satisfied with pleasures which were merely physical. Never had she shown her heart to the world and never did she mean to show it, but Mary would best protect her, and help her to hide it.

Yet she wished to be a little calmer before she ran the risk of terrifying Mary.

But while she debated the question a tap as of light fingers came at the door, which she had locked, and Eva Capern's silvery voice cried—

"My dear, let me in, I have come to ask you to let me brush my hair in your room.

"I don't know how it is," she said, when she

had seated herself, "but I felt that I could not sleep a wink to-night unless I had a good croon with you. I am anxious about *you*, and it is when we women get nervous about each other that we take to stimulants and morphia and all sorts of naughty habits. I fight against them for your sake. Since I entered your house, I positively have dropped using rouge, and am so moderate in alcohol that I have some idea of distinguishing myself as a teetotaler—there, don't blush—it is all your influence! I made up my mind to tell you so. No, I can assure you I am incapable of paying compliments; you should have found out that by this time."

Having wheedled her friend to this extent, Eva proceeded to pump her, brushing out her fair locks as she said tentatively:

"You influence all of us—even your husband, But you must not be too hard on him—his

ideas of life are the society ideas, and if you have found out anything you don't quite like about him, you may depend upon it he has been more sinned against than sinning. I said to myself when I saw you to-night, 'she has found out something.' It is of no use to deny it—you were not yourself.

"You had dressed yourself up too magnificently—your eyes looked too weary to bear successfully the brilliance of all those shining jewels—and your diamonds *are* splendid. But you talked—really my dear, I believe for once you were conscious that you were not quite sincere and you are generally so hard on us others, but you were a little unlike yourself—You were gay with an unnatural gaiety which was forced, and sometimes relapsed into silence.

"I have always said to myself, 'Zina is not a woman to have her individuality swamped in

her husband's, and if George Layton thinks he can succeed in effacing it he will rue his mistake.' But, my dear, you will have to do like the rest of us—manage the men without openly finding fault with them.

"I am sure you have nothing to complain of; you have everything which heart can desire, and I am sure that your poor father—"

Mrs. Capern was a clever woman, but she had overshot the mark. If Zina had overdone *her* part that evening, Eva too had betrayed herself—used as she was to plot and to tell fibs to secure her object.

The hurried way in which she spoke, catching her breath, betrayed her fear that the convenient *pied-à-terre* in Mrs. Layton's beautiful house, more than ever useful in a life likely to be of a semi-nomadic stamp, might fail her.

Mrs. Capern prided herself on being good-hearted; she would not allow her conscience to reproach her for the part she had played in making up this match.

She had meant no harm and had acted according to her lights; it was rather too strong for that conscience to turn round on her and twit her with trickery and worthlessness.

Still there was a look almost of panic on Eva's face as if she feared that whatever had happened was beyond the little skilful attempts on which she prided herself in the way of patching up. She could learn nothing from the expression of the handsome *silhouette* sharply-cut against the becoming background of the room; if Zina's face had been called sphinx-like by those who admired it in the old days, it was more than sphinxlike now in its imperturbable immobility.

In the misery which had overwhelmed her Eva's chatter did not signify—nothing really signified.

She was ceasing to believe in herself or in human nature generally. It was all rubbish about the possibilities of the race—and certainly she had altogether ceased to have illusions about the goodness of the other sex.

So little did she resent the interference that Mrs. Capern added tentatively,

“You are no worse off than crowds of other women—men are all alike and women are fools who expect too much from them. My dear, he is a man, and no better than the rest of them.”

Then Zina roused herself to stand on the defensive, and determined to protect herself from this impertinent curiosity, as well as from a pity which would have been intolerable.

She had become apparently unconscious, and

insensible to the fact that such things could be flaunted in her face, as she interrupted the stream of chatter by saying—

“If you allude to my father, please remember the honour due to his name,” and then she added quite quietly, “you best know yourself what you mean by the other innuendo. When a man is as brilliant and successful as George he is sure to have detractors. I have never complained of anything and never mean to complain. When I *do* it will be time enough to give me your advice, but till then please remember that I take the sole responsibility on myself for anything which goes wrong in this house.”

“Really, my dear, it is too tantalising; you are one of the people to whom it is difficult to say things straight out, and I cannot undertake always to put them into unexceptionable language.”

CHAPTER XI.

TAKING REFUGE.

IT was some comfort to Zina to find herself alone, and to reflect that the interfering visit had so far been fortunate that when Eva left her piqued and offended, she could at least remember that she had heard *her*—the wife—exonerate George, so that when the time came for gossip he would be saved from some of the drops which might have made his cup more bitter.

Eva determined to make her own position good with Mr. Layton, by quoting Zina, whose

present mood was for self-sacrifice, and for utter indifference to the opinion of the world.

She had no pity left for the "fool," whose anxiety for action was so intense that it left her no time to reflect on the mortification inflicted on herself, no time to bewail the desolation of her life; the warning signs written in flaming letters as by the moving hand in Belshazzar's vision seeming to be inscribed on every wall of the house.

It was as if in a few hours a gulf had suddenly opened, yawning, between Zina and everything which had seemed natural before.

In the boudoir which communicated with her dressing-room, she could no longer touch her music, which lay open on the piano, though she had been taking a lesson in singing but the day before from a master who came from London, as George wished her to learn from notes.

She had begun a business-letter which lay open on the little inlaid *escritoire*, but tried in vain to remember what it was about, tearing it in pieces and throwing them away from her.

The very papers and curtains seemed to palpitate with the thoughts which had taken possession of her in that house, and the remembrances of that last six months.

Her wandering eyes noted once more the beautiful furniture and the collection of curios, with perceptions which seemed to have been acutely developed, and a certain deplorable atrophy of her natural feelings.

If her lot had seemed like misery, directly she discovered its true meaning, she said to herself it had been "gilded misery," and that it was time she determined no longer to wear such gilded chains. And then she began to

reproach herself for building her faith so firmly on the sand.

Had she been a creature without a will, without a sense of right, that she had allowed herself to be led so quietly and unresistingly into a fool's paradise? And next her ideas lapsed into confusion, and it was some time before she could recover her power of continuous thought.

Yet she had to write, and tried to do so, looking in a weary, non-comprehending way at the words she was writing. Did it much matter however stupid her wording might be? Could she ever hope to make George Layton understand that in this case the obstacle was no small one which could be knocked out of the way?

Every sound had ceased in the house, and there was only the note of a night-jar among the trees as she began to put together the

jewels her father had given her; they made but a small package when her other ornaments and costly dresses were left behind her.

The thought of this did not trouble her.

“Why should the word poverty be a synonym for calamity? Man is in the world to work for others, not for himself, and I shall have two children to work for now.

“After all, it will suit me better than leading the life I have been leading lately—a parasitic existence like that endured by certain of the ants nourished by their slaves,” she thought, trying to comfort herself by far-fetched ideas as she dressed herself in her plainest dress and crept out into the garden on her way to the lonely cottage just as the sun was rising with tints of daffodil, rose, and purple glory—touches of the enchanter’s wand which she did not even look at.

After all, it was not her own dignity, her own sentiment or wounded feeling on which she was acting now, but her larger sense of right and wrong, of equity and justice. She knew that she could not act otherwise, and yet it was no accident, but steady deliberation which made her turn her eyes from the sky that she might not endure the heartbreak of the unanswered question to which the silence could not respond—the question which had been asked from generation to generation.

If she could have believed in any Infinite Good, or Infinite Love to sympathise with these unsatisfied yearnings, she knew that her ordeal would have been less severe.

George Layton, who was accustomed to sleep late, also rose somewhat earlier than usual that morning.

He had been taken by surprise by his wife's

bearing on the previous evening, and could not understand her changed mood. He would have liked it almost better if she had shewn *something* of what she had been suffering and rather feared the results of her forced attempt to hide it so completely, though he had judged it better not to intrude upon her after they separated in the drawing-room.

He tried to hide his own uneasiness even from himself when he found that the bed had not been slept upon, and that a letter directed in a shaky handwriting—scarcely like his wife's—had been pinned to the dressing-table.

When he read it, he was still determined to make the best of it, and his pride helped him in trying to shut his eyes to the horror of the discovery that Zina had actually left him, and the numerous other unpleasant things which must sooner or later follow on the heels of that discovery.

“Women have their tiffs and get out of them. I shall say that she was not well, and that I had given her leave to go on a visit to some friends—quietly in the country—without bothering herself with leave-taking”, he said to himself, feeling somewhat sick of the Japanese curiosities grinning at him from the walls and screens, and of all the articles of *vertu* with which he had furnished those rooms.

Ye gods! it was more than he could believe at first!

He, of all men, as he reflected indignantly, ought to have been protected from such a catastrophe.

He had married a wife who was no “bread-and-butter miss,” but who was familiar with the classical literature of ancient Greece and Rome, and conversant from her own acknowledgment with the worst forms of evil in the world.

Women of such cultivated intellect were reported to be cold; at any rate they had their own resources, and he had never interfered with his wife in her intellectual debauches.

Her fancies were artistic, her desires, he had supposed would be easily satisfied he had at least drawn large cheques to satisfy them. She had had her musical orgies, and her den in which she could mess with paints to her heart's delight.

He had supposed she was the last woman to go off at a tangent like this. But now, if she chose to give him his liberty, should he not also have *his* freedom? He had never pretended to be more than human.

A few hours afterwards a lady thickly veiled, wearing a long cloak which hid her figure, took her place in the railway carriage, amongst the third-class passengers, for London.

She had already called at the cottage and left enough money to defray the expenses of a simple funeral. It was easy to do this from the ample allowance which George Layton had always made his wife. Some of the "pin-money" had accumulated, as she had found it difficult to spend the whole on fripperies.

"You must bring me the little one," she said encouragingly to Daisy, "as soon as I am able to give you my new address, and I will find a careful nurse for her. I am going away for a little time, and one of the arrangements I want to make is about your schooling."

And though the poor girl burst into grateful tears, it was impossible for her to realise that any sacrifice would be involved, or that she and her dead sister had been selfish in any way in inflicting their troubles upon another who proved so ready to share them.

The beautiful Mrs. Layton seemed so far away from her or from her world that she could only vaguely wonder why she had dressed herself so plainly, or why it was that her face looked so white and drawn in the early morning light.

"Do not weep for your sister, she is better off," Zina heard her own voice repeating, as if it were a truism utterly meaningless to her.

And then feeling like the ghost of herself, or a miserable atom whirled about in the shuttle of destiny, she set out for the great city—her main object being to live *perduc*—at least for a time.

She remembered having heard that people who wished to efface themselves without leaving a trace of their whereabouts—so that detection could be baffled in their pursuit, and not a clue be discoverable—could do so best in London, especially at the East End.

It was but a short time before that she had made herself merry at the absurdity of folks who had the unpleasant habit of disappearing in this way from their relatives, leaving the world by way of a freak, and returning again when tired of the somewhat pointless joke.

She was vexed with herself for seeming to imitate such maniacs, as she bent her own steps to the crowded East, knowing that it would be foolish to attempt to dispose of her jewellery in the pawnbrokers' shops, which were filled with refuse—the battered and broken drift-wood which the tide of human life was leaving festering behind it—but being thankful that she had still sufficient money for her immediate wants.

Yet the place which she had chosen only made her sadder; she had forgotten that it

is our own moods which make or mar everything for us.

Had Zina visited it as a philanthropist her experience would have been different. But her heart was just now filled with an unconscious longing after the simpler life of the people—a life belonging to an earlier civilisation when the rules which guided conduct were less complex and less minute.

She was sick of that personal casuistry which each mind must think out separately for itself, sick of overluxury, sick of pampered indulgence. And she was doomed to fresh disappointment.

Afterwards she acknowledged that she was in that sort of mental *malaise* in which her thoughts had no time to settle to anything, in which she still seemed to be counting the breaths of that dying woman.

Even her own sense of personal injury made

her somehow feel base and weak. And she had chosen the worst spot in which to seek forgetfulness, unless indeed it were such forgetfulness as could only result in the extinction of Self, or triumph in the pessimism which revolted against the selfishness of prolonging human existence.

“It is only for a few days—only to get a breathing space, while I have time to write to Mary, and then I will be brave, for why should I hide from him? He cannot compel me to go back; he will not do it for his own sake,” she said to herself, comparing her own lot favourably with that of tens of thousands of working women—her suffering sisters in the great metropolis, of whose terrible struggles and temptations amidst pestilential moral and physical surroundings, she told herself she had thought too little in the days of her luxury and ease.

She was haunted long afterwards by the look on some of those other women's faces—a look which her own trouble perhaps caused her to exaggerate—a look sick with misery and yet making her ashamed of attaching too much importance to her own grief.

When she wandered out for a lonely ramble the sight of one of the bridges with sluggish water beneath had a strange effect on her distempered imagination.

As an artist she admired the putrescent tints; as a woman she thought of the ghastly procession of ruined women recruited from the ranks of the weak and the betrayed who had tried to drown their misfortunes in the foul depths which had lured them. She could fancy it all—the shrill scream followed by a splash and then the despairing upturned face.

She drew a deep breath and hastened on.

Was there any sister whom she could help, or any sister who could help *her* amongst this mass of human beings—so near to each other in body and so widely separated in spirit that none knew of the sufferings of another?

Was this part of London with its constant influx of foreigners worse than other great cities? Was there more bodily destitution, more physical misery than in other parts of the world?

And then to her distempered fancy it seemed that the world itself was seething with moral decay like the world before the flood.

She was ill and out of sorts as she had been once before in youth and not answerable for her perverted fancies.

“Why should I expect to be so much better off than they are, and even now I know little of the cold and desolate rooms, the aching

bodies, the continual craving for food, the unloved, miserable lives, and the desperate battle to exist, which goes on from morning to night with so many of them," she thought as she wrote to Mary, and asked if that kind-hearted friend could take her in to be once more a "working woman", toiling at her painting not only for her own daily bread, but for the daily bread of a little child whom she had promised to support.

She said nothing of the young girl—Daisy—who would also have to be fitted for earning her own living as a teacher, and who could, perhaps, be taken in as a pupil-teacher at some school.

The knowledge that Mary Carruthers knew more about the practical difficulty of these things than she did, and would think her quite beside herself, prompted her to keep back

all mention of Daisy. Neither did she tell Mary any of the circumstances which had led to her leaving her home.

Her first impulse, which was to consult somebody, had to be fought against, for she was perfectly convinced, after sleeping upon it, that none of the "wise saws and modern instances" could help in her case.

Mary herself had passed through much suffering lately, and as Zina, frenzied and agonised, felt as if she could bear no more, she attempted to steel herself by drawing out Mary's last pathetic letter, and reminding herself that one so gentle and tender as her friend had emerged through an ordeal uncomplainingly.

Zina had never sympathised with Mary in her devotion to the Professor, but she had felt deeply for her poor friend when about a

year before, near the time of her own marriage, Mary had written to tell her of the shock she had received in the sudden death of her dearly-loved James.

Dr. Carruthers had been found dead in his bed, and Zina with her vivid imagination had pictured to herself, after Mary's description, one more human being lying cold and stiff, obeying the voice of the stern Presence, while her gentle friend called in vain to the white face pillowed on her arm, in the darkness which could be felt, and which seemed to strike on her eyeballs—the thing which had to be covered with a sheet being all that was left to her of the husband she had worshipped.

Neither had Zina thought it wonderful that the letters which followed should be filled with James's praises—always the case when a man is dead.

Mary seemed to have found out when her husband was gone that he had been the main-spring of the household, and did not see the humour of it when she naïvely wrote, "we never knew it till we missed him."

But now nearly a year had gone by, and the ranks had closed up as usual. And though the widow had declined to visit Zina, she had moved from her cottage in the country, which she seemed to look upon as a place of the tombs, filled with memories of the past, and wrote that the unspeakable value of every moment of time had been taught to her by the nearness of death.

She held her children so dear that she refused to leave them at all, but she seemed to prosper more than she had done before in London. An old uncle had died and left her a sum of money which, with her limited ideas, seemed to her considerable.

The professor had always been her most expensive child, it had ever been hardest to minister to his tastes. And now when her two boys had been taken off her hands—the one by a successful teaplanter in Ceylon, and the other admitted as a “Middy” in a training-ship—there was no longer any stint in Mary’s household.

She had enough, as she said, to share with outsiders, for she still continued to make extra money, faithfully going the round of the treadmill.

CHAPTER XII.

ONE OF THE WORKING WOMEN.

MARY'S sympathies were as ready as ever, when after a few days spent in vainly trying unaided to collect her old energies, Zina came to her one evening from the East, arriving at the well-known retreat in Great Coram-street, where old associations which she would gladly have dismissed for ever were recalled by every sight and sound.

The little girls had gone to bed, but Mary had been expecting Zina and opened her arms

at the first rustle of her dress, and the first sound of her step on the uncarpeted stairs.

"Come to me, my dear! Come in and shut the door, and warm yourself by the fire. I kept it up till you came. I knew you would come—some instinct told me it would be to-night," she said, gazing with consternation at the pale and almost inanimate form, which moved as it stiffened in every limb, with livid violet round the eyes, the deep circles evidently riven by agony. "You look as if the life had gone out of you. Why I do believe you must have walked—it is raining—and you are wet."

"Do you suppose I care for the rain?" Zina cried for the first time passionately, forgetting her resolutions. "Let it wet me through and through—do you think I should care?"

"But, my dear, you will get your death,"

remonstrated the other woman with motherly commonsense.

“Do you not know that there are some things a thousand times worse than *death*? Dear, it is you who are the child and *I* who have aged,” Zina cried. Her cheeks were no longer white. There was a hot current within her veins, and she was no longer inanimate, but painfully conscious of all the agony she was repressing, as Mary queried in a low, shocked voice—

“What does it mean, dear? I hope there is nothing wrong between you and your husband?”

“Don’t ask me to tell you the truth,” she answered almost irritably. “It means that it is all over—all that was worth having in life. As the French say, *Rien n’est si triste que la vérité*. It is enough that I have left him.”

"*Left him?* Do you mean to make me believe you have left your husband? Why I should have said you were the last woman to be mixed up in a scandal of that sort!"

"Perhaps I left him to avoid a scandal," answered Zina in that curious lifeless voice which had been hers ever since she had tried to reason with George.

She had made up her mind to confide in no one. No one could act as her confidante, as she told Mary—Mary, who in her white innocence surrounded by her little ones, knew nothing of impure lives or disordered wills; nothing of sin, digging its serpent-fangs into the tainted flesh, or of the transmission from father to son of some sinister tendency—surely Mary would be the last woman to make anything of a story like hers!

“Life seems a little impossible sometimes,” she only said with the wan smile which went to Mary’s heart; “but I do not know that it would make it any easier if I were to confide in *you*—or anyone.”

She begged not to be questioned further, hoping in her secret heart to be saved from commonplace talk and also from the reflections which might be cast upon her husband.

And Mary, who knew that there was no use in interfering between husband and wife, kept her qualms to herself, and contented herself with petting and comforting the vagrant. The kind woman’s surmises were numerous, but all of them were dismissed as soon as she entertained them.

Zina had neither a sarcastic tongue nor a petulant temper, and was not likely to quarrel; nor was she of a jealous disposition, her nature

being too high to admit suspicion. As to gossip, she was not at all likely to be misled by it.

It was easy for a woman who had any wits about her to sift untruthful gossip and deprive it of its sting. Any unkind hints of that sort would only be wasted on Zina; she would treat them as they deserved.

Yet *what* could have happened that one so generous and truthful should turn from her day after day, with a despairing cry, "Forgive me for coming to you; I felt I *must* come to you if you would take me in; for I was so lonely, and—I felt as if I might do something terrible, if left to myself."

"Hush, hush!" said Mrs. Carruthers soothingly, "do not talk so wildly. James would have said you were quite right not to tell me too much."

She was always fond of quoting James and making him out to have been a paragon of wisdom, and just now it gave Zina a horrible inclination to laugh hysterically.

For in her secret heart she could not help knowing that had James been living it would have been almost impossible for his wife to brave his peevish discontent at her thus opening her doors as well as her heart to a vagrant.

She envied Mary her belief in the coerulean skies in which the apathetic and somewhat selfish James was supposed to have taken refuge, but could not help knowing that he would have coldly and sternly disapproved of her admission into his earthly domicile, had he been living still.

Well, belief was always difficult! But Zina was fair enough to acknowledge to herself that there was nothing in the Christian faith really

inconsistent with progress after death. Every analogy in life was in favour of that progress, and she had a vague idea that there was something in the Book about those who entered into life maimed and blind.

James was either dead altogether, or perhaps he understood things a little better now, yet once or twice Mary was faintly aware that for the children's sakes—especially the sake of her little girls—there was a feeling of uneasiness in her own large heart lest she should be mixing herself up with matters which might bring discredit on them.

Zina had hinted at something of the sort. Yet as she sometimes sat rocking herself backwards and forwards, with her big eyes fixed on vacancy—the irises large and splendid, but the pupils unnaturally contracted—there were times when Mary feared from the gaze of

those scared eyes continually fixed on the past, that the mind of this poor friend, who shut her grief so determinedly within her own breast, might give way.

One night when she caught her sitting in such fashion, crying beneath her breath, "Oh the pain—the pain!" because she thought herself unobserved, the motherly Mary could endure it no longer, but catching her hands, exclaimed, "My dear, what *is* it?"

Zina looked up. All the lines of her face had hardened, the youthful curves were no longer there. To defend herself at George's expense seemed to her mean and cowardly.

She drew her hands away, and gazed with intentness at the faded wall-paper, which Mary had never thought of having renewed.

"Well to confess the truth," she said, "we had a few words. Believe me, perfect love is not for this earth."

The answer sounded unnatural, and Mary was hurt.

"Is it your desire," she said a little more sternly "to make an irreparable breach before the world for the sake of a 'few words'? Think of what you are doing—you have the example to society to think of."

"Oh, society can take care of itself; it is bad enough already, and doesn't need *me* to set an example to it."

Her estimate of society had always been low and had sunk still lower since her marriage to George Layton.

"Would it not have been better to avoid the open rupture?"

"No, it would not; none of us can be better for acting a lie."

"But people will think—it is *you* who will be despised—the world is always down on

a fugitive wife—the world will be sure to lay the blame on the woman.”

“I am quite prepared for it to do so.”

“It is always a hard judge.”

“I do not care for its judgment. Who cares about the contempt of the world? It is the shame of wrong-doing for which we should care,” cried Zina losing her patience.

She was shaken and unnerved, and there was a recklessness about her which frightened the other woman as she continued:

“I will tell you this much; he was bound to another before he cared for me. It was a previous contract—it ought to have been if it were not, and any previous contract renders the other void. That is why——”

She did not finish the sentence, but this idea was evidently the key to her action in the matter.

"That is a dangerous way of putting things. You mean that Mr. Layton——?"

"Hush," Zina cried, "do not speak against him. I could not bear that. *I* am the one to be blamed; I have braved that public opinion which oils the wheels of society and acts like unseen law, setting the machinery in motion without friction. You are right to be properly shocked at me; none of the guests at my husband's house would ever have braved it. And yet——" she broke off again as if to check impulsiveness and then said, as if speaking to herself:

"It is a farce to be made to swear to love and obey a man when you don't know how your opinions may change about him when you come to know him—swear to love too, as if certain things did not kill love, and as if love could be enforced by any oath."

“That is another of your wild ideas.”

“I used to have many queer ideas—highly objectionable you would have called them, but I hoped they would take to themselves wings when I came to *you*. If I could begin my life over again, if I were only free! But I see now that when I was free I was simply egotistic, wrapped up in my own pursuits, and I trifled with the affections which, neglected, have taken their revenge on me.”

“The woman’s constancy is generally so much greater than the man’s,” remarked Mary tentatively.

But her observation was not answered, and Zina continued silent as she added:

“If he is self-indulgent, most men are *that*.”

She took no notice of this other feeler. She had long ceased to be angry; no dwelling on her wrongs could make them less, but in this

case it was not her own wrongs on which she dwelt. Something worse had succeeded to her anger, the dull aching of a heart which knew that the corpse of a dead love could never be galvanized into life.

If she sometimes rambled on in the perturbation of a mind ill at ease she was careful to keep the honour of her husband's name intact. And by degrees Mary became used to her disconnected talk and let it flow on as some relief for the over-wrought feelings, though her feverish talkativeness, so unlike her usual quiet and restrained self, and the way in which she listened with trepidation for every footstep, shewed that the strain had been too much for her and the reaction had come at last.

It was painful to see her young form bending nearly double under the weight of her grief, fighting it out so that no one else could

help her, too wretched to trouble herself about appearances—collapsed and exhausted. It was like the end of all things, a stupefaction—a desolation in which nothing was left.

How to shake her out of it was poor Mary's puzzle.

First she tried her old plan of chattering about her books.

“When I flatter myself I have got any new idea somebody else is sure to have got it before me. I feel like Daudet's poet when I sit down to write as if I must give it up because somebody else has stolen all my best thoughts. Dame Nature is very cruel; she sets a lot of her pupils the same tasks at the same moment, humbugging them by whispering separately into the ears of each of them that he or she is the only one to whom she entrusts one of her best ‘tips’, and when the

poor fools are taken in—because ideas belong to none of them, but are in the air—they begin to squabble with each other and accuse each other of plagiarism.”

But Zina did not hear her.

And Mary had to change her system. She no longer pretended to rattle on in self-mockery about her own affairs, but put her arms round her friend and soothed her, stroking her hair as she would have stroked that of a tired child.

For Mary had the power without preaching of being able to tranquillise, though the differences between the two women, of which Stuart Newbolt had been aware years before, had never been more emphasized than they were at present. It worried the exact and orthodox Mary that Zina should care so little for her good name; all her tenderness was needed not to show that it shocked her.

“You are a mesmerist,” murmured Zina; “you can bring people back to health with a touch of your gentle hand. I do not believe in diabolic agency, but if I did I should think that all illness was a part of the devil’s work, and people who are more or less angelic like you can drive away the devil. But that is the hard part of it. The martyrs could go through tortures with their firm belief in golden cities and great white thrones, but I have no such hopes to sustain me, I—”

At last she was asleep. Evidently she had been light-headed, not knowing what she said, and Mrs. Carruthers, who watched over her for some hours of that night, heard her start from her dreams crying:

“Oh, then, it was not true!” and address some woman of the name of Agnes, telling her to rest tranquilly—she would keep her promise.

CHAPTER XIII.

WAS IT A DREAM?

THE next morning Mary found Zina fully dressed at an early hour, her hands clasped round her knees and staring vaguely out of the window.

“What nonsense did I talk last night,” she asked anxiously. “Forget it. Oh, try and forget if I said anything about things which I ought to have kept a secret. I could never have talked to you in that foolish way if I had not felt sure you would make allowance

for my folly; you are not the sort of woman to put it down in your mind."

She was still wild-eyed and pallid, with a tingling feeling in her veins, shrinking from the spring sun which was shining into the room, as if she wished to hide herself rather than it should creep nearer to her.

"I was the right person for you to come to if you were going to be ill," answered Mrs. Carruthers, parrying her question.

"But I am not going to be ill. I have too much work to do—two children to look after," was the answer which astonished Mary. "I brought my paints with me. I must set to work at once."

And she forced herself to the task, though the occupation for which she had cared so much proved to be distasteful to her.

The painting which she had loved could

not bring more than temporary relief, the beautiful scenes in which she had once delighted had all become vague to her. They were inconsistent with the stupor which meant rebellion against fate.

Her very exhaustion, bodily and mental, had become a sort of luxury—she abandoned herself to it, and work was inconsistent with it. After an effort to paint she awoke again to all her old misery; the attempt to depict beauty only aggravating her consciousness of the ugliness of evil. She had been wounded so deeply that she felt as if she could never recover her old trustful nature; she was haunted by the wickedness of the world; a constant sense of it nauseated her.

The taint which she would not admit to be the “trail of the serpent” was all the worse if it originated in the brute-like, ape-like nature

of man—a brutishness which interminable centuries of culture had been powerless to root out.

She seemed to have a part in it, reminding herself that she too, for a doubtful good, had been ready to “play with hollow nuts for a stake of hollow nuts,” and asking herself what spell could have dulled her maidenly instincts and caused her to fall a victim to George Layton’s plausible language? Of all this she was not even tempted to speak.

It seemed to her that,

“Better than such discourse did silence long,

Long barren silence square with her desire.”

“It is all too hateful; I only want to forget it,” was all that she acknowledged to Mrs. Carruthers, who had to be content with guesses.

For after all, as she said to herself, how

could Mary comfort her? She might mesmerize her by her gentle touch, but their ways of thinking were so different.

Mary, who cherished the mild conviction that obedience with unreasoning admiration was a married woman's duty! Mary with her gracious sweetness and her gentle way of ignoring the harder facts of life whenever they were unpleasant to her! As well might she emulate the confiding shop-girls who consulted the motherly woman concerning their 'Arries and their illusions!'

No, the thought of Mary's kindness and unflagging selfishness was a stimulating thought, but she could never brace her courage so as to confront that gentle soul with her more cruel knowledge, and more subtle ideas respecting a difficulty such as hers.

"Try to cry; cry and you will feel better,"

that kind-hearted woman had said to her more than once, as the days passed on—the feverish hard-working days, in the intervals of which Zina was not tempted to shed tears.

“It was not her way,” as she explained to Mary as she still sat staring in front of her, her eyes large and wide-opened with a sort of fear in them which was terrible to witness, adding that “she supposed something had gone wrong in the making of her.”

It was indeed as if the ingredients, as she further explained, had “not been properly mixed.”

For she was certainly, according to Mary’s judgment, too susceptible in some points, and too callous in others.

“If you intend to exhibit under your own name, and sell your pictures under that name, he will find you out; and then—you cannot try

for a separation unless you have proper grounds," said Mrs. Carruthers a little nervously one day.

She was startled when Zina answered, "I never thought of trying for it. It is the ease with which people try for separations which weakens the marriage tie; but *we* were never properly married. I shall exhibit under my maiden name."

And then she set to work again, as if she had said something which was quite trivial, determining not to let her feelings of discontent and misery master her.

So the months went on till the days were beginning to be warm, and Zina—used to a luxurious life—was feeling oppressed by the heat, and yet fought against the conviction that her bodily discomfort must exercise an injurious influence over the creations of her mind.

She was ashamed of her languor and exhaustion, ashamed of the sudden impulse which impelled her to cry out, "How can I bear my life? Will it always go on like this?" controlling her gestures of despair.

"You are not your sensible self," said Mary, fearing that she was laying up fresh troubles for the future.

"Oh, do not talk in that way. It's of no use trying to be sensible. I can only do the best I can to patch up my broken life," was Zina's answer.

And then she astonished Mary more by insisting on sending for the baby, whose claims on her it was difficult to explain.

"I am growing proud and unloving; I who have nothing to give but love, for I have lost all my big ideas, I have no power left. I cannot even paint," was the only explana-

tion she vouchsafed to her mystified friend.

How could Mary guess that the swelling of the heart, the woman's yearning, of which in these advanced days so many women are beginning to be ashamed, for baby fingers to clasp her neck, and some tender and innocent creature to be entirely dependent upon her, was smouldering beneath her other agitations?

Mrs. Carruthers was very human and free from pretences of being what she was not; but it was putting her unconventionality a little too much to the test to insist on foisting an infant on her respectable establishment for whose parentage no one was able to account.

"I cannot help it if you disapprove," said Zina as she gathered the child in her arms. "The kindest thing is silence, or I would tell you all about it."

And Mary did not press her. Both women shared the same abhorrence, and were unwilling to stir up the mud of this world's defilement.

But as soon as the little one made its appearance, and from the time when she succeeded, almost beyond her hopes, in placing Daisy as a pupil-teacher in a school where she would be well trained, Zina began to take greater interest in her work.

A life of emotion which cannot be connected with action must sooner or later become a life of disease, but when we fully accept the theory that self-sacrifice is the true law of life, and that only by pain and struggle is progress made, the defect in our insufficient nature which debars us from understanding the lavish overflow of the Divine love, is more or less removed.

Zina's cares were increased, but her morbid feelings were decreased. It was as if an easeful feeling for which she could not account had taken her for a time out of herself.

"Am I drunk with sorrow? It seems to me

That my pain is less than it used to be;

My pain and I have grown such friends,

And our converse has sunk to a monotone."

she repeated to herself one night as she laid her weary head on the pillow, and then she added with a sort of smile, which touched her lips and was completed in her eyes, as she looked at the helpless little creature in the cradle by her side—

"I put pain behind me, and lie so still,

I might almost be dreaming of good,

But dreams presuppose some symptoms of will."

She fell asleep with the words on her lips, and wondered afterwards if the quotation could

possibly have suggested the dream which followed.

It was less a dream than a vision. No vocal prayer had been hers; it was long since she had believed sufficiently to try to speak to God. And yet it was as if the very silence had become vocal, and a still small voice were speaking to her though she could not tell what it said.

She had attempted, as many have done, to give more or less of her life to an elaboration of the vision of the beautiful which was always haunting her, but now for the first time it was hers to be haunted in a trance in which she was merely passive, and yet became as "a mad blind man" who sees.

Her mind had not been dwelling lately on sacred pictures. George Layton's ill-repressed scorn for the oft-repeated studies of virgins and

children, and his objection to having copies from the old masters hanging upon his walls, had influenced her, though she would scarcely have admitted it, to such an extent that she had only occupied herself lately with small *genre* paintings.

The more extraordinary did it afterwards seem that the face which appeared to her should have been one with signs of blood from the crown of thorns on its brows, with the pleading eyes sunk in caverns as though the source of tears were dried up in them. The pallid lips seemed to tell of unutterable yearning, and the garments hung in stiff folds round the emaciated shoulders.

She woke. Had she been haunted by some of the pictures she had seen? Her memory ran through all of them, from the earlier pre-Raphaelite painters to Carlo Dolci's *Ecce Homo*,

or in modern times—Holman Hunt's mystical paintings. If her memory had retained any of these it had strangely altered them, yet what could it be but the creation of her own bewildered brain?

She rose and dressed herself hastily, going up into the small room at the top of the house, lit by a skylight, which Mary had allotted to her as a studio. For it was the *expression* of the face from which she could not escape.

It seemed to follow her everywhere with its purity, and its pleading, till the determination to put the enigma to the test was upon her—and the longing to paint was beginning to torment her as with the pain of hunger.

She got out of bed, and paced about the room trying to control herself, and mentally reviewing all that had passed during the last few days, and her repeatedly expressed deter-

mination to work for bread for herself and the two children—only painting ordinary subjects.

“The pot-boilers are good enough to serve their purpose, though of course no one pretends they are high efforts, and I am a little ashamed of adding another to the numerous people who let Art down” she had said more than once.

Even now she repeated to herself the formula that little everyday sketches were the pictures to *sell*, and that she would never undertake any others.

“They are my style of work,” she had said a day or two before to Mary, “just as yours, dear, is writing for the ‘Family Sympathiser’. Why should either of us mind if we are obliged to earn money?”

That seemed to be commonsense, and so was a conversation which came back to her

from the past—a talk of certain artists at her father's house, who had discussed the possibility of painting modern pictures at this more ambitious level.

“It depends upon how you conceive your subject—whether you paint with the Strauss-Renan idea, or whether you try to enter, as some of our modern Pre-Raphaelites have tried, into the illimitable mystery which pervades the religion of the East,” she remembered that one of these artists had said, and how another had answered “I can only render it as it seems possible to *me*,” with the quick retort from the other, “And *you* have combated all the ecclesiastical traditions—you have changed them for such watchwords as natural selection, evolution or negation.”

Stuart Newbolt had stood by smiling his smile of polite, scarcely interested, attention

and it had never occurred to his daughter in her wildest dreams that she, of all other people in the world, who prided herself on having been educated in that freedom of thought which is only reached after severe struggles—the struggles of generations—should attempt a theme which even these artists could speak of as hackneyed, or almost impossible to treat with any sort of originality.

But the real fact was she did not mean to attempt it; it had come upon her, and was taking possession of her. She was not conscious of any idea which could have been leading up to it, for had she not abruptly stopped poor Mary when that kind friend had tried to hint at any sort of religious comfort?

She struggled now and fought against the feelings which overwhelmed her. Surely this was nonsense! But how strange!

She could no longer be guided by the opinions of artists, who were inclined to dissect everything in a materialistic and mechanical age.—She seemed to be obliged to obey the command of a power which compelled her when, hastily dressing herself, she began to sketch in an outline, and mix the colours on her palette.

Ah, how would it be possible for the dead canvas to interpret the reality which haunted her and seemed to permeate her whole being? Never had she a greater conviction of her own incapacity. She trembled with excitement; her hand shook so that at first she could not steady it, but once more the tenacious will asserted itself.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PICTURE.

MARY found her an hour afterwards, so occupied that she did not hear her enter the room. She had apparently forgotten her necessary breakfast, and had to be coaxed to take it by letting one of the children bring it up and put it on a chair by her side. There was an amount of vital energy still about the artist, who might have been excused for considering herself an invalid, which astonished Mrs. Caruthers, who did not know that she was

endeavouring to fix a fugitive intangible vision.

Mary was alarmed. It was evident to her that her friend's nerves were excited to an extraordinary degree. She herself had advised her to do whatever work she had to do in her own way. "That way lies success if success is to come to you—don't listen to critics," she had added from her own experience. But to the practical matter-of-fact woman this inveterate pursuit of some new idea seemed an obstinacy which was almost morbid.

"What are you painting?" she ventured to ask when she came up again to remind Zina of the hour for luncheon, hoping for a little conversation, and she was naturally a good deal astonished when Zina answered less cordially than usual, and then tried to explain with a muttered apology, "I hate being questioned about a subject when I hardly know myself."

“Why do you not sit down to it? You must be tired of standing.”

And again Zina put her off with a smile which was enigmatical. “What would be the use of telling her that I am painting an optical delusion?” she said to herself with a shrug of the shoulders.

What would have been the use of telling anyone that in her new intentness and a sort of humility which she could not comprehend, she felt as if she could do better standing before the easel, and for the first time could comprehend the stories of Fra Angelico, who was said to have painted on his knees? But Fra Angelico no doubt believed in the occult, and she, as she repeated to herself, was no such fool; she was only painting an optical delusion!

And yet this thing was real to her

as nothing had been for days and weeks, and as she painted it her thoughts were ravished and lifted up, as it were against her will, and her memory was verse-haunted.

“And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see ;

But if he could see and hear this Vision—were it not *He*?”

The words ran on, ringing their refrain on her brain, and she tried in vain to get rid of them, as she tried equally in vain to forget the sounds which she thought she had heard in her dream:

“These are the wounds of my passion wherewith I am still wounded in the House of my Friends.”

If it were so, then she had a full explanation of the awful consequences of sin, for if a Divine being were still really existent, wounded continually in the persons of all His creatures great and small, and

if the temple of their body could possibly be the house wherein a Divine guest were suffering—then indeed there would be a new solution to the social problems which had tormented her. She did not accept the solution, and yet as she painted on, it became apparent to her that her picture would preach as no sermon could have done.

And the world with its anxious struggles its heart-burnings, its sorrows, and even its sins, was forgotten for a time—all her own miserable little private history seemed to be put on one side. Everything personal and small seemed to be swallowed up; she was inspired with her lofty conception.

The idea grew upon her day after day that it must have been something objective and not in her own mind which she was labouring so wildly to depict—not a figment of her

imagination, not a thing she could have invented. She had an inward conviction that a mere woman like herself could never even have thought of it.

And oh, that avowal of infirmity, when her want of technical skill stood hopelessly in her way, and she felt unable to remove the veil which transposed for the minute between herself and her vision!

She had a fair light in the old wainscoted room which Mary had lent to her for her work, but it was not good enough for a studio, and not only were there efforts of nervous anxiety in the attempt to go back to the moment when she had actually seen that which she wished to fix on canvas, but other moments as intense when the fever of expectation would bring out drops of perspiration on her brow.

For she had not overrated the difficulties. The difficulties were real, too great at times for her to conquer, in spite of the something which filled her eyes, and her mind, and for which her heart laboured panting in its longing after expression.

Never would she have confessed to any human being that there were hours, before that picture was finished, when she had felt as if a thrill were passing through her heart, such as that of which the old prophets had spoken in a Book she did not often read. Hours also when she felt for the time as if she had the power to render the Face—a power beyond herself, though she did not know whence it came or when that power might forsake her.

But in those hours it was as if another hand guided hers, and the figure which she

had conceived with the burning desire to paint it, and the dread of being defeated (with a horror of defeat which made her almost crazy) grew steadily before her eyes—not pretentious or ridiculous, still less mediocre or hackneyed, but that which had been given to her in an exalted moment when the majority of people would have called her mad.

Her eyes often smarted and were tired with her work, but she covered them with her hands for a few moments and then went on—dreading nothing so much as the suspension of her mental faculties—lest she should lose the recollection—oh—how she felt as if she would give anything not to lose it, but to be able to follow it and keep hold of it through the mazes of her brain, lest it should be driven out by other extirpating thoughts.

There was nothing she feared so much as imitation of other artists.

To imitate nobody, not one of the sacred painters —to get them all out of her head and paint only *this*!

For the first time it seemed to her that she was putting her whole life into her work. But she did not even ask herself if she meant to exhibit the picture as she worked on with trembling hands, the inexorable power of art upon her.

Angels and even Madonnas might be the creations of men, but this was real—*real*, as she told herself with bated breath; whatever it meant it was real; “it had been given to her.”

Adverse comments might be made if she ventured to exhibit it; they would not even affect *her*, as she repeated to herself. But

they might make her feel a hypocrite. For was it not true that this was—no longer the copying of an inward idea—but a revelation which had been made to her, the credit of which she could not claim?

Nevertheless her delight was once more in her Art.

And again the little white hand looked graceful holding the sheaf of brushes, and the upright figure had a new spring in it as it bent lightly forward, more often standing than sitting at the easel.

From this time everything seemed to be changed for her. She no longer cried out that she could not live and bear it.

The annoying wrangles about trifles which fall to the lot of many a lonely woman who has to fight her way in the world, and the uncomfortable letters or interviews which some-

times passed respecting the admission or hanging of her other and smaller pictures in one or other of the exhibitions, did not have power to disturb her. And the physical fatigue, which had followed upon the strain which her mental unhappiness had put upon every faculty, seemed to have passed away.

It was as if she moved in a new atmosphere in which the undesirable disgust at all things, and the recoil from the dingy surroundings in Mary's lodgings in smoke-dried London, no longer worried her.

She no longer turned against the untempting beverage which Mrs. Carruthers dignified by the name of tea when she poured it out for her noisy children from the ugly britannia-metal teapot, and could even afford to smile when that kind woman said encouragingly:

"I feel sure you will not fail, though you

have been so Quixotic as to take the burden of two other lives upon you; a strong dose of poverty is rather serviceable than otherwise to a young woman gifted like you, dear."

For Mary's words were so far true that the old days seemed to come back when Zina had been able to bear any privations for art's sake, and when work for the love of work had been its own reward. If the remembrance of that dream was fading away from her, it yet seemed to give force and momentum to her life.

The new idea that there might be eyes watching her of which her fellow-creatures did not know was making her more or less indifferent to the strictures which would be sure to come to her.

She had not heard from Mr. Layton; it seemed as if he would take her at her word. But she was no longer cowardly about him

and could have smiled to herself if she had heard the comments which were made on two of her pictures when they were favourably spoken of by the critics at one of the next exhibitions. "Don't repeat the scandals about her. She is an artist, she has genius; it is allowed to women of that sort to lead an exceptional existence."

And the world which can often afford to be kind, because it is never hard up for a new scandal, made its benevolent excuses for her—partly because she was erratic—while George Layton escaped the least shadow of blame.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RETURN OF AN OLD FRIEND.

ZINA'S other pictures sold speedily, and for a time she was scarcely able to execute the orders which came to her for more.

Probably the curiosity which existed about a lady of whom varying stories were told, and who insisted on exhibiting by her maiden name, may have had something to do with the desire which a few of the connoisseurs expressed to have "a bit of her work."

Nor was she ever hard up for subjects. Switzerland and Italy had supplied her with innumerable "bits," and her two or three next pictures added to her reputation. These were a picturesque well in a Swiss valley with a peasant boy supplying his horses with water; an Italian fruit-stall with women in full white sleeves and red handkerchiefs fastened cunningly over their heads; and "Haymaking on the mountains," in which two tired sunburnt labourers were reposing on the grass.

It was universally admitted that Miss Newbolt had displayed all the deft-handedness of the French impressionist school in painting the foregrounds of spring flowers, white narcissi, golden ranunculi, pink polygonums, and feathery umbellifers, especially in that scene of the haymakers in Switzerland, and people were ready enough to buy up her other little recollections

of Venice and its waterways, or Bignasco and its adjacent valleys.

But the critics differed about her; "a way they have," as Zina quietly observed. One said that her principal charm was in her subtle appreciation of character, while she needed to study colour, and another, that both handling and character could be improved, but that her principal attraction was as a colourist.

"As if anyone could define colour, or all the writing about it could do any good," said the artist laughing. "Its charm is as indescribable as the flavour of wine or the scent of a flower."

Meanwhile it became necessary for her to take a larger and more airy studio, and one was found for her in an adjacent street. It separated her from Mary, but it also separated

her from minor worries. She could look back with a smile on that time of her life when she had been vexed with herself for finding the petty details of a family circle stupid, hollow and dull, and had allowed herself to be fretted by the little thoughts of the little minds, and the little jokes which tried so hard to be amusing. She took a larger view of these things now, but she needed time to concentrate her thoughts.

She accused herself still of being indolent and cowardly, and determined that even pot-boiling should be done earnestly and heartily. It did not occur to her to remember that, even in a place of retirement of her own, she would find it impossible to live in that state of exaltation which is generally followed by reaction in the case of every mortal.

And it also exposed her to other evils. It

made it more and more difficult for her to deny herself to outsiders.

Men who heard that she had a studio would occasionally find it out, send up their cards, and ask leave to look at a few of Miss Newbolt's pictures; so that, careful as she was to deny herself to these intruders, she found herself sometimes taken by surprise.

These accidents which were annoying to her might have accounted for a slight return of her former mood. Certain it was that she began to work with more fitful energy, and when she returned in the evenings to Mary and the children she would be less ready to converse with them, sinking back into long intervals of silence.

And when one day Mary told her of a gentleman who wished to be introduced to her—a Signor Villari—she did not know the

name—a musician, and artist like herself—who had admired her paintings, and longed to befriend her, she gave her consent somewhat grudgingly and unwillingly, as if it were all a part of the necessary inconveniences associated with her growing fame.

“One has to be on one’s guard against these Bohemians, though one is a Bohemian one’s self,” she explained. “I came to London to make myself ‘a lodge in a vast wilderness’, and it is not my fault if it will no longer remain a wilderness for *me*.”

“Most artists are alike, with an eye for a pretty girl or a beautiful woman,” Mrs. Carruthers acknowledged, “but this one has not seen you yet, and he seems to be actuated entirely by a wish to befriend you. He told me he could give you an introduction to some American dealers, and those introductions are not to be

despised, as you have to pay a nurse for taking care of the child—and have ‘pot-boilers’ to dispose of as well as I have.”

It seemed very chivalrous of him, as Zina murmured in answer, but it was not the first time she had met with chivalrous men. She did not confide in Mary who was present at the first meeting, the habit having grown on her of keeping difficulties to herself; but Mary was not deceived by the way in which the two people—supposed to be strangers—looked into each other’s eyes.

“I should have been quite taken aback,” as she said afterwards, “if I did not feel sure it was not really your first meeting.”

“No, I used to meet him at my father’s house. He always played well, though he had not much voice *then*—he has developed it since—and I suppose his relations must object

to his *début* as an opera-singer, since he calls himself Villari; his real name is Dewe. I think these affectations in the changes of names rather ridiculous," was all she said in explanation, not deeming it necessary to tell the whole truth for fear of implicating Stephen though she was vexed at his device, and only excused it because she would otherwise have refused to see him.

It was on the tip of Mary's tongue to answer, "I don't wish to vex you, but for God's sake think of the gossips, they have said enough already," but the recollection of how Zina invariably laughed at her with the quick rejoinder, "'What say they? Let them say'—it matters nothing what people say about us behind our backs," kept her from remonstrating.

Zina, as she acknowledged to herself, could some times be led but never driven, and nine

times out of ten she would "gang her own gait."

She was too proud even to speak to him about the *ruse* he had adopted.

Why indeed should she refer to the past, or make any allusion to the days when she had met him at her father's house, still less to those more miserable days, when he had allowed an ignoble suspicion to take root in his heart?

She was a little glad that he should know the absurdity of that suspicion now. But for the rest she desired to live as an artist, only in cloudland, or in other words, in her "wilderness," ignoring the disasters she had passed through.

And so long as he, also an artist, was content to live in cloudland too, and only to converse on things which belonged to the

sphere of art, she saw no reason why she should not allow him to do his best to enliven her solitude.

So when Stephen Dewe took to lounging in his spare hours into the great empty room which Zina had engaged as a studio, cheering her up by retailing to her the witty discussions and brilliant paradoxes, the *bon mots* of the literary world—such as she had heard at her father's table—she saw no reason why she should not make an exception in his favour, and admit him as an old friend whose talk seemed to annihilate the dreary interval between the past and present, and bring a sense of exhilaration to the intellect such as she had not known since her father's death.

As time passed on the great room was no longer ugly and empty, for Zina had disguised its ugliness with palms, ferns, dried grasses,

and plaster casts, which cost her little, and yet made a picturesque litter.

She had her anatomical models, and even her skeleton which was reverently covered up after she had studied from it, much to her visitor's amusement, but her other surroundings were beautiful. For Zina, who did not like things new, had managed to pick up some pieces of deliciously faded silk covered with old embroidery which she had bought for a mere song because other people scorned them.

One of the old pieces of embroidery was even moth-eaten, but she insisted on keeping it because it reminded her of a bit of Italian tapestry, with golden fruit and winged boys, purchased at Florence, which she had left behind her in her old home.

She loved these things for their intrinsic

beauty and it never occurred to her to think of the pretty background they supplied to her own graceful figure seated at the easel, robed in sage-green cashmere, which also was economical as Mary had cut it out, and Mary's daughters helped to make it for her with the sewing-machine which manufactured nearly everything in the Carruthers' household. Yet it had the artist's touch about it, and fitted her like a glove.

Stephen Dewe shewed tact. He seldom spoke of himself, and never referred to the past, but he could be entertaining and even witty; his career had developed him.

And more than once, to her astonishment, Zina found herself ready to joke in answer, and to wonder why she had so dreaded meeting again with this man, who bore so slight a likeness to the undeveloped Stephen Dewe of her earlier recollections.

It seemed no such important or terrible affair after all. Her nerves must have been overstrained with morbid brooding over trifles, when she had admitted to herself that if Stephen Dewe had not been diplomatic—introducing himself, in Mary's presence, under a pseudonyme which surprised her—she would certainly have refused to see him, and more decidedly than she declined to see other men," who, once admitted, would have buzzed about her like flies.

"It was foolish and self-conscious of me," she thought to herself, "as if that love-story had not been dropped so long ago that it would be impossible for him to take up the threads of it even if I were not as I am—a woman doomed to long widowhood, and wedded to misfortune."

She had honestly striven to renounce all

recollection of former happiness, and never for an instant suspected fate of forging fresh links to bring her into contact with a former lover; yet, unconventional as ever, she did not know how to define the exact standard of manner in a case so complicated.

He had suggested a piano as an ornament which might be useful at the farthest corner of the studio, and she—feeling that she could not accept a favour from him—made a show of consenting, and hired a piano herself, not knowing that by the subtle influence of music she was supplying him once more with the power of bringing mind to bear upon mind.

For music is one of the mysteries which transcends the gift of speech, with a means of awakening the tender emotion which no words can ever equal.

“Is music a forgotten language of which

the sense is lost while the sound only remains? Is it reminiscence? Is it the primeval language, —or the language of a future state of existence?" an Italian thinker has asked. But that it had a power of interfusing unexpressed sympathetic thought into the innermost nature of any sensitive being was unsuspected by one of these two people. Nor did Zina guess when she listened to the dulcet harmonies, with that sharp pain at the heart which enervated her, and to which she had become accustomed so long ago, that these sounds were drawing them together as by an irresistible force.

At their first meeting Stephen Dewe had thought her less beautiful.

Something had changed in her face; the brilliancy of the eyes had suddenly become extinguished. He was aware of the subtle difference, though the majority of people would

have seen little alteration in her. She had indeed from the first made up her mind not to "wear her heart on her sleeve" and latterly it had been her habit when looking at herself in the mirror to determine to let no wrinkle—no drawn face—betray her to the outward world.

Now and then those same eyes shone with a strange far-away light which he did not understand.

He had heard fragments of her story, and piecing them together had judged the husband rather than the wife, reproaching himself bitterly for his weakness in having lost her, and yet, inconsistently enough, he had suspected her of attitudinising before the world, in an attitude common, as he thought bitterly, to her sex.

But after a time he changed his opinion about this last indictment.

Zina was simple as ever, and her own worst enemy, exalted as ever in her idealism, and only too ready to accuse herself of faults of which she was innocent as a baby.

He experienced all the pleasure he had felt in playing to her when she had been a simple child—as if her senses had been more acute than other people's.

He remembered how, in the old days when he had known her intimately, the smell of the rain had been delightful to her, and the sunshine had affected her pleasurably with a new joy in existence. And now to these childish impressions were added the intellectual and spiritual development of a woman who had thought, felt, and suffered in a way which seemed to be revealed to him by the telepathy between them.

He began to thank the great masters.

ancient and modern—Bach, Handel, Schubert, Rubinstein, Wagner, and Grieg—who supplied him with the means of inducing something of the same state of mind in her which he felt to be in himself.

It reminded her of the former days when, in the seclusion of her father's house, he had been in the habit of improvising and reproducing the divine melodies which were continually entrancing her, but which, unaided, she could never reproduce. He alone of all others seemed to have the power to help her to forget the past, and seize the beauty which eluded her when she tried to paint it. She was never weary of listening to him. Now it would be one of Chopin's intricate waltzes winding in and out in delicious mazes of sound, and now one of Beethoven's pathetic movements full of aspiration and delicate feeling,

which seemed to bring her inspiration and comfort chasing away the bitterness of despair.

Her gentle "thank you" as she looked up from her work, or the pleading "go on—one wants to hear that twice," were all that he needed, whilst only to look at her picturesque head, draped sometimes in a becoming *fichu* and to please himself with her winning manner was all the reward he needed.

One day he wandered into the studio where she was sitting as usual painting, with signs of weariness in her drooping figure, and for the first time the conversation drifted into the personal, he begging her not to work so hard.

"It is hateful to see you fagging like this," he said, as he went to the piano and struck a few chords on it. Then, without waiting for her answer, he began to sing.

It was one of the last new songs of the great German composer, Johannes Brahms. The theme was of hope, of life, of love.

Every note, every pause, every *nuance* of expression in the highly-cultivated tenor voice with its full rich timbre conveyed a definite meaning to the listener. He had counted on the effect it would produce just as a skilful physician could calculate on the effect of a drug, and smiled to himself as he saw the lightning of her eyes.

"I must not be a creature of impulse; I was that once, with time slipping away and nothing achieved," she said.

"There is such a thing as being womanly without being womanish. You are an adept at your art, but you are not one of those unsexed women who can fight with men for their daily bread."

He played as he talked and she put down her brush in an attitude of thoughtful, not unpleasant, meditation, the resonance of the full chords rousing magnetic feeling in nerves and brain.

And once more he sang in tones which allured and vibrated, supplemented by the bewitching strain of a running accompaniment on the piano.

This time he had chosen an Italian song, every note corresponding to some unuttered human feeling, unexpressed in speech.

It was a song which shewed off the full compass of his voice, rising like a flute in the upper notes, and then again descending to solemn organ-fulness in the lower ones.

The change in Zina's face became marked as she listened. And once again the pathos and the pity of human life were revealed to her

in the surging restless chords as he plunged into a *morceau* of Wagner's wildest music, the last notes climbing higher and yet higher as if they would take the seventh heaven by storm, and repeat the offence of Prometheus by stealing fire from Paradise.

Zina sighed. Every nerve in her will was in subjection to her emotion.

And again he recalled the girlish days when her eyes had filled at the same sounds with passionate adoration, and when he—fool that he was—had undervalued that dangerous, intoxicating, worshipping sort of love, as for a hero or a demi-god, making one tremble for the girl.

He remembered how he had presumed on its continuance, though neither of them had dared to make it known to her father, and then how it had cooled as she grew older.

"I am *only* a musician," he said with mock humility. "My father was a musician before me."

And she, whom he had hitherto contemned in his secret heart for the new reserve of what he called her "frozen manners," answered unwisely with passionate vehemence, "I would rather inherit distinction of that sort than any amount of land or titles."

CHAPTER XVI.

"WE CAN NEVER SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN."

ZINA reproached herself for her impulsiveness when Stephen Dewe left her that afternoon, telling herself that she did not wish to be thrown so much in his society, and that it was undesirable they should find coincidences of thought.

At first she had felt positive that she should experience the same disappointment in this constant association with him which he would

be sure to feel with her, but she was beginning to be less certain and to have a fear lest his admiration for her should suddenly be re-kindled.

“Why should I be afraid of anything now? I have known the worst which life can send me. I am a faded woman, as lonely as an Indian widow and banned by the opinion of the world,” she said to herself. But there were days when she trembled a little, and took herself to task for vanity in the mere fact of that trembling.

She was in state of mental discomfort, aware of the artificiality of the position between them, and yet unwilling to discuss the question with Mary. A sort of instinct prompted her not even to show him that which she considered to be incomparably her best picture. She hastily stopped him when he tried to look at it.

"I reserve my best things; they are not for everyone, not even for my friends," she said, taxing herself afterwards for affectation in the excuse. "We have all of us our pictures or our writings in which we tell our secrets, as a poet tells his in his poems, and you tell yours in your music—we are never inclined to part with them for money."

"That is all very well when people have independent money, or make as much as you do by your sketches, but what about the other poor devils who are obliged to sell their secrets?" he laughed back in reply, as she stooped over a portfolio to hide the rush of crimson which suddenly dyed her cheeks.

The same instinct might have warned her how unwise had been her policy in begging Mary not to let her children come so often to her studio, to help her to clean her palette

or put away her brushes ; the senses of children being far keener than those of adults which are blunted with age, and the comments which the elder girl had made having more than once become awkward.

Stephen's hurry to dismiss the little girls might have opened her eyes, since the race of children from whom anything can be hidden is becoming beautifully less, but in spite of all she had gone through she was still an idealist and would not admit the possibility of new evils to herself.

Mary was not suspicious when she found that her girls had been discouraged from making their constant visits. Their very glee, their animation, their bubbling merriment, as they in their simplicity plied their mother's friend with tiresome questions,—their cheeks dimpling with pleasure as they taxed their

inventiveness to dress the lay-figure in the newest types of fashion—might have been supposed to be amusing, had there not been a fear that their blunt directness would ferret out secrets unknown to the artist herself.

A sort of languor came over Zina as the days grew hotter and she began to look with expectant interest for Stephen's music.

She felt a little desolate if he did not come, and was reassured when she heard his footsteps on the threshold. He began to take his ease as a familiar friend, criticising her work. It was unconventional, as Mary told her. But she put Mary off with a smile which was so innocent that the latter felt she might as well reason with an unsophisticated child.

"Is he not my *friend*?" she asked with that smile, "one of the last links with my old home. Are all the friendships to

be destroyed because people will be artificial?"

One day when she had been suffering with headache, and he chatting on as he brought her a budget of news from the outer world, keeping her "posted up," as they both expressed it, in the latest political and social events, her suffering mastered her.

The work which she had been finishing lately had been thoroughly against the grain, and she was the first to depreciate it.

"It is horribly bad," she said looking at it with an expression of disgust, whilst the headache which had disguised itself for some time returned with fresh virulence—thud—thud, with a sickening sensation as if hammers were beating on her brain.

"There is nothing so silly as to paint," she added, "without being tremendously in earnest."

She put down her brushes, and pressed her

hands suddenly to her head, "Oh, if the pain would not go on like that—if I could know what it was altogether to forget."

It was an unwise cry, and as he heard it a wild joy filled his heart. He was not a practised intriguer and the desire to throw off disguises came upon him so strongly that it resolved itself in action. There was a sound as of rushing water in his ears, as something in that pale loveliness which he found it difficult to resist prompted him to put his hand on her shoulder in a brotherly way, which was almost caressing.

"Obey me," he said, "and put away that painting—you work too often and too much—go away—you are nervous and need a change—I understand you better now than when I knew you first. I blame myself severely for not having understood then that you were nervously

agonised, with a highly-impressionable disposition inherited not only from your father, but probably also from your Russian mother—did you not once tell me that you believed she was a Russian? The very fact that music makes such an immense impression on you proves that you are very”—he had almost said “*fin de siècle*,” but rejected the affected expression for “receptive,”—adding “much more receptive than the majority of coldblooded Englishwomen. You are nervous now, because you are overstrained and need a change which you are quite well able to afford—put the painting away.”

It was the first time he had ventured to touch her, but she did not resent his touch.

She asked herself why she should shrink? — this man had been her *friend*. He sang and his singing had eased her of a feeling of tension, it had helped her to wrestle with her

difficulties. He talked brilliantly and her troubles were dwarfed.

How did she know that he might not help her with his clearer wisdom to make those wise deductions of the best to be done under difficult circumstances, in which no one else could help her?

Her conscience suggested Mary. But Mary from her very goodness was narrow and timorous, praying every night that the hosts of darkness might not approach her home; it seemed a curious fact that Mary, of all people in the world, owing to her kindness in the past should be mixed up at all with a scandal.

Mary must have known, when she spoke tenderly to her friend, how the Professor would have acted; how he would have cast Mrs. Layton off lest she should defile his girls. Zina was conscious of a thickening in her

throat as she remembered how this last asylum might have failed her had not Mary been widowed.

It seemed for the moment to be a relief to have some male friend to turn to.

She did not reason about it, as she gathered up the brushes, putting them away obediently in the box. On the contrary she felt tempted to tell him all.

The longing for an ear into which she could pour out her story—for some man, old enough to be her listener—a man, if possible, with the training and experience of a Roman Catholic priest, was at times insufferable.

But then again she would shrink from laying bare her private experiences, deeming it mean to tell a tale which could not be told without in some way implicating her husband, and something whispered to her that

Stephen Dewe's was not exactly the ear to which the story of her secret struggles should be poured out. Yet she sighed, and her voice sounded strangely in her throat.

A sudden weakness had come upon her, an egoism which was unusual. How could she expect others to make excuses for her, she argued, when her secret was still unknown to any other human being than herself? Was it not hard to persevere shrouded in this mantle of silence?

"I wish I could tell you," she said wistfully, still with that impulse to confide in someone who did not know her intimately enough to be able to accuse her of speaking disparagingly of her husband—not a matter-of-fact woman who would be likely to remind her that she had been too young and too confiding in not making more minute inquiries before

her marriage—but a man who could not question her too much about all the circumstances. Yet her sensitive conscience kept her tongue-tied, reproaching her already with the weakness it would be wiser to subdue.

And once more she reasoned with herself. If only there had been *anyone* to whom she could open her heart instead of shrinking as she did from Mary's prim conventionality—anyone who would understand her sensation of complete dissatisfaction with herself as well as with the other persons implicated, and who would somehow help her out of it, perhaps enabling her to make a new beginning!

She did not undervalue Mary's love, but Mary, as she had before acknowledged to herself, was too much of a housewife and too little of a dreamer, occupied for the sake of her children with the material necessities of

life, to be a confidante in matters of this sort, or to enter at all earnestly into her friend's sense of paralysis in grappling with things condoned by the majority.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION.

THE struggle was so great that it was as if two parallel lines of thought, in each of which there seemed to be no deflection, were present to her mind; she was not aware that she was inclining to one side or the other.

“Confide in *me*—once for all—I implore you,” he said, in tones hoarse with emotion, and turning deadly white as the suggestion of trouble in her face was reflected in his own as in a mirror; “there is no one in all the

world who is so ready to lay down his life to help you."

But the lines of thought in her mind were no longer parallel. She shrank from him visibly. The *de profundis* cry had roused her to a sense of her present danger.

He waited anxiously for her answer. But there was no movement of her mobile lips; her hands were still pressed together as she sat staring at him evidently incapable of reply, and dreading the ghosts of the future just as she had been hoping to slay the ghosts of the past.

She was hard on herself at that moment, ruthlessly cruel to her own weakness, accusing herself of putting herself blindly and wickedly in the power of a man whose love was not yet dead for her.

If such a horrible thing existed as any answering feeling on her part, it might account for

the tumult just then raging within her—a tumult which affected her bodily health while she had been trying to keep up the appearance of calmness.

“Surely,” he continued in that strange hoarse voice, “there should be no such thing as feeling wretched when we are near each other. Whatever may have happened you have the greater part of your life before you. You think you have *lived*, but I tell you that you have not; you have only vegetated, or suffered, while the healthy joy of life should be yours.”

His speech terrified her with its sudden vehemence; she looked at him strangely. She thought she had given away all the love she possessed, but was it possible that from the dead branches lopped down to the roots, there could spring fresh shoots, hardier than those which had been destroyed?

A strange terror, such as had been more than once subtly communicated to her by the music, was taking possession of her again, as if some black shadow with features which she could not see were crouching behind the visible tempter.

She tried to speak, but her lips were dry and stiff. High as her spirit was he was succeeding in humiliating her, for a fear for which she despised herself was upon her.

Such a situation had always seemed to her to be simple, and she had despised those other women who could not release themselves from it calmly and quietly and at once. But for the first time since she had parted with George Layton and thrown herself alone on the tender mercies of the world, she felt her self-control deserting her.

A voice whispered in her ears, "You are

not bound to abide by your bitter bargain. Your husband deceived you, and was united by all the ties of honour and affection to another creature, however wretched, before he met you. The tie which he formed with you was hollow and unreal. Why do you shut your eyes to the happiness which may be left? What have you to lose—you, whose name is already blackened in the estimation of the world. You have been broken-hearted and wretched, and you are offered a refuge. It is true that you love everything which is beautiful and enjoyable—the blooming flowers, the sound of music—and do not like drudging work. Why banish yourself into exile? You have only one life; why sacrifice it for a delusion?"

Then she heard Dewe's voice with its passionate appeal. "Do not punish me for ever

for one foolish mistake. I wronged you once, I mistook you, but fate has thrown us together again."

And for a moment she allowed herself to think—how would it have been supposing he had indeed become intimately related with herself—a part of her life? If she—and she began to picture to herself how everything might have been well if her father had not intervened between them.

And then, mercifully, her recollection came to her assistance, and her resentment burst forth, her woman's courage rising above that of the man's, and shaming him.

"There is no such thing as fate being too strong for anyone," she said, and then her voice suddenly burst into desperate sobbing.

"Have you altogether buried the horrible thoughts you once had of me?" she asked,

“when you tortured your imagination, thinking strange things about me, and when you drove me almost mad and left me in that condition of madness. It spoilt my life!”

He had grown pale; and hollows were in his cheeks which she had never seen before, as she continued, scarcely able to control the trembling of her lips, or properly shape the words.

“Oh, I am older now, and I understand perfectly that you, who had only your music, could not be expected to know anything about psychology or pathology.”

“Long words are they not?” she added with a mocking laugh.

And then more gravely, “I pity you in the past as much as I pity myself. For I know what you thought of me—thought of me when I was delirious, and in my weakness and delirium accused myself of monstrosities.

"Could I help being a woman—weak and worn-out with all I had gone through?—women are said to be inconsequent, illogical, fanciful! I have never allowed these imputations on my sex and do not allow them now. But there are times when bodily sickness prostrates women more than men—times when those who are stronger should stand by us—when—"

"For pity's sake, say no more." He was at her feet. Never had he felt the dross in his nature, the shame of self which checked his utterance—as at a moment like this.

It was too late, the spell was broken.

"You tried to analyse my character just now," she said, looking at him with a new impulse of disdain, "and now let me try to analyse *you*. You are an artist, without much inherent energy, and your power of shaping your own life vanishes into viewless air, like the

music which you can extemporize but never originate. Your admiration of me, ever since I have known you, has been only artistic."

"But for you," she continued with a break in her voice, "my whole life might have been different from what it is.

"You were the first to cause me bitter disappointment, and to make me lose my faith in the ideal.

"It was not your fault that when you left me it was not *in you* to comprehend all that you had broken in me, and how the terrible part would be for me to *live*—death seldom seems very hard to the despairing young who have scarcely tightened their grasp on life—but to live on, disenchanted, that was harder!

And now you come to me—the devil prompting you—"

Once more she could not complete her

sentence. She tried to speak, but the effort was useless, resolving itself in no syllable.

Her mental strength was failing her, but her spiritual force became dominant. She would prove to herself that she had will-power, knowing that the situation must not be dallied with, but put an end to at once. So that when he cast himself at her feet, telling her that he had always meant to come back, that he had never imagined she would forget him, she said with a supreme effort:

“The deadly nightshade grows close to such forget-me-nots; and even forgiveness in my case does not imply what *you* call love.”

To argue might be to succumb; she felt it, and had recourse to gesture to indicate her wish to be alone.

He admired the magnificence of her outlines, the tragic dignity of the pose of her

figure, when she waved him back and added:

“You should have respected me as you would have respected a cloistered nun—or a widow—bound by sacred vows to perpetual widowhood! If you had not spoken like this you might have been my *friend*—I might have forgiven you though I could never have forgotten.

“I had overlooked the past, indeed I trusted you as a helper—a solacer of my solitude; but now all that is impossible, and I know how mad I have been to think that it could be possible.

O heaven, the pity of it! If I had thought for one moment that I could be misconstrued—that you could not come to me as a brother comes—that the familiarity which I had called friendship—the music which had helped me over the difficult places—would give rise to

misconception—to thoughts like *these*—thoughts to be ashamed of—to lower one to the dust!

Go, it is your fault—it was not in you to understand friendship—you have taught me that there is no such thing as that purer atmosphere which I in my imbecility—poor fool that I was—dreamt of. Go, we can never see each other again.”

He would willingly have protracted the interview, but he saw no means of doing it. It was as if the loftiness of her spirit overpowered him, and he flinched before it.

“Go!” she repeated, obeying the finer impulses which so often serve women better than their colder and more calculating reflections; “now that I know you feel in this way—the very fact of your feeling so prevents us from being friends. Why should you linger here? The sooner we part the better. I shall

never regret it—go!” she repeated, ashamed of the growing agitation in her voice; “we may meet in the next world—if there is an after-life—but never again in *this*.”

And he left her, obeying a parting look which would cause her always to be sublime to his memory.

He had been a sybarite and a dreamer all his life, but in that moment he felt that he should never regret not having sacrificed her good name to his egotism and selfishness.

In another instant she was alone, but stood rooted to the spot. The crisis of danger and mortal agony was past, but the recollection of it was like a girder of iron about her heart.

“How intoxicating, how deceiving the dead sleep of conscience, but ah, the waking--the waking!” she thought to herself. “Oh, the hard and bitter realities of life!”

Saved as if by the merest accident, escaping by the skin of her teeth from the cruel tender mercies of this last so-called *friend*, who had abused the cordial familiarity to which she, in her forlorn solitude, had thought to admit him, she hated herself for the weakness which had so nearly overcome her.

There was a throbbing pain at her heart. Would it break down altogether, and end in physical disease?

The passionate sobbing had been tearless, and even now she was denied the bodily relief of tears. She opened one of the windows and let the cold air blow on her, as if to help her to think.

And then she thought of the picture which for the last few weeks had been resting against the wall, with a piece of brocade

thrown over it to keep it from vulgar eyes.

She remembered how she had not been able to show it to Stephen Dewe because she felt that she had not merely painted the portrait of a man; how it had roused her from her state of desolation and stupefaction, and how latterly she had been trying to persuade herself that this feeling was superstitious.

She took it up tenderly and put it on the easel, feeling more sure than ever that she could never exhibit it.

Possibly it had a message for her! Was it true, as she had heard Mary's friends argue, that no one could speak sincerely of duty without implying his trust in some unseen Power, strong enough to infuse strength into the will of man?

She had stoutly denied the proposition, but were not the old ethical conceptions everywhere

falling into discredit? Were not the very data on which right and wrong rested called into question?

It was not possible for her to ignore the reality and intensity of the present crisis in morality; and in her mood of self-aborrence the dicta of science seemed no longer capable of being the sole guides for educated man.

Her feet, which were not patient, had now reached the bottom of the valley of humiliation—there were no fresh depths for her to traverse. Now at least she could be poor in spirit, thinking as she hoped for mercy, more mercifully of a temperament which was so different from her own—and more pitifully of temptations of which she had hitherto had no comprehension.

She longed for the love which pardons offences, but she longed for purity also, since

a love which allowed itself to be dragged in the mire could not help to raise a fellow-mortal.

She yearned for something which could help tottering footsteps, her own as well as her husband's, and cried through the darkness.

"God, if thou dost exist, deign to shew thyself to me—let the vision become once more real, without fancies' deceiving me! I have loved Thy creatures desperately and madly, with a love which should have been given to Thee. I am rightly and justly punished, and now with the dregs of life, with affections squandered on nothingness, I come to offer myself to Thee. How do I dare to do it?"

And then came the merciful relief of tears and she wept as only such women weep, with teeth set, and mouth compressed, struggling against her weakness.

She was worn-out, pale to the lips, and evidently exhausted, when she appeared at the frugal breakfast-table on the following morning; yet with a strength which had never failed her she forced herself to seem collected, and no one asked her any questions.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GEORGE LAYTON VISITS THE STUDIO.

GEORGE LAYTON had never been the same man since Zina left him.

At first he had tried to reason with himself in spite of the somewhat incoherent letter which she had left pinned to the dressing-table, and perhaps on the very account of its incoherency, that his wife would think the better of it and come back soon. All women, as he said to himself, protested more than they meant, and perhaps when sufficient

pressure was put on her she would retract.

The worst which could happen would be a silly visit to London, or to some of her friends in the country. He thought instantly of the Carruthers and remembered that Mary Carruthers was a woman to be trusted.

And so he gave out that a lady had sent for Mrs. Layton, one of her former friends, who was seriously ill, and that she had asked him to make her apologies for her, feeling in his secret heart that as soon as the other women cleared out the better he would be pleased.

It rained all the day, but she did not return at nightfall, nor on the next day.

When her maid told him that no tidings had been received from her, and that reports were about in the village, he answered, with a wild gesture which made the girl recoil as

if he had aimed a blow at her, "It is not true," and then with an effort he recovered himself—so strong was his desire to keep up appearances.

He walked more than once into Zina's rooms, remembering how they had laughed together in happier days at the hangings with the antique and abandoned forms which nature had done her best to obliterate and which were revived again in these curious Japanese imaginings, and looked with loathing at the dressing-table on which he had found the letter announcing her resolve.

He remembered how he had taken special pains in choosing that article of furniture.

It was delicately carved and inlaid with small china tiles, hand-painted and executed from the designs of Walter Crane. A number

of little drawers had contained her costly trinkets, and he found on looking through them that not a trinket he had given her had been taken.

It was more mortifying still to discover on examining her jewel-box, the key of which had been carefully enclosed in the letter, that all the costly presents he had showered on her—the diamonds, pearls, and sapphires—had been left behind.

He took up a necklace of opals—her favourite amongst the ornaments—and gazed at the varying colours of the stones; he had seen it last with the milky azure, pink, and violet gleaming on the shining satin of her neck and shoulders. But he had known that she had never cared for jewels, and that she had always resented the way in which he had forced her to display her charms for the benefit

of other men who might gaze on them and appreciate them.

He had looked upon her as a possession to be his to his dying day.

Had he not paid the full price for his right of property in her, and had it not added to his satisfaction that other people should think highly of what he had paid for?

But he knew as he looked at the jewels that he had never been able to tarnish her, and that something intangible, immaterial, had escaped him even in the days when he had thought to bind her.

He took the letter out of his pocket and read it again, perceiving for the first time a hurried postscript like a rider to the document, which increased his anguish and his anger.

“Do not be afraid that anyone will blame you. I take all the blame for what has hap-

pened on myself. It is my intention to resume my maiden name."

For the first time he reasoned that there were ante-chambers in her nature, locked and barred to men like him, depths which his plummet line could never penetrate.

From the beginning she had never wearied him with aimless chatter, and though his own careless hands had been ready to thrust her forth in paths which might have lowered a weaker and less modest nature, there had been no parade or flourish of trumpets in the display of her attractions.

And even when she had made her last fatal discovery, and when she had had courage to reproach him to his face, she was not a woman to wear him out with perpetual complaining.

Had such scenes been repeated he might have learnt to hate her, but it was only that once.

She had spared him, taking the burden on her young shoulders, and had perceived with admirable common-sense that nothing could be gained by mutual recrimination. She had said her say and she had left him.

He had not seen much of her lately; he did not admit to himself at once that this was partly his own fault, and that from his youth upwards there had been times when he had preferred the company of men whose subtle, moral taint had contaminated everything. He had called his wife a prude; he had set himself to lower her ideal. In vain!

He had told himself that he hated women of the Lady Byron type, and that if poor Byron had married his early love his whole life might have been different.

But whether he was justified in that opinion or not, he could not pretend that Zina had

had anything in common with that feminine type.

There had been nothing irritating in his wife's parade of goodness, and she had never before attempted to cast imputations upon him,—imputations which might bring out all that was reprobate in his nature.

On the contrary she had been sympathetic and tolerant and never given to sermonising.

“Empty and dark is the house without her,
Empty and dark through the open door.”

He did not know why it was that this woman had so slipped into her place that he could not do without her.

He wondered that he could not; for it would only have been in accordance with his former life if, in the rage of a man baffled by fate, he had been able to curse her and forget her.

For he had ever been governed by impulse, and had too often "ceased to care," and did not consider himself responsible for the wasted fires, and the impulses of youth which had so frequently died out.

That poor woman who was dead, for instance, had been only a pretty emty-headed doll, who had not understood that constancy was not possible to him, and of whom he had wearied when satiated by possession.

He had intended to "do handsomely by her" if she had not been so insane as to reject his offers of money and he tried to persuade himself, even now, that his conduct towards her had not been incompatible with the code of honour practised by gentlemen.

But it was different with his wife.

Not many months had passed and yet her presence had become as natural to him as the

trees and the flowers, the pictures on the walls, and the birds which sang in his garden.

"I will have patience," he said, "and keep up a dignified silence, and she will return to me penitent. She will not be able to support herself, and will miss the luxuries and all the comforts with which I surrounded her. Beautiful women are capricious and whimsical, but as they grow older they learn to adapt themselves to other people. And meanwhile we must avoid a scandal."

So as the time went on, and the house was emptying of guests, one story after another came glibly to his lips.

But scandal was too much for him. It stole into his house decked in sable robes, and seated itself determinately beside his hearth.

He tried his best to snap his fingers at it, and to avoid the annoying scenes, the indefinite

innuendoes, all made at the expense of the woman whom his sense of justice prompted him to protect.

The better part of his nature made him feel that a cut direct to himself would have been as nothing, a mere flea-bite, compared to his agony of vexation about his wife.

And yet infuriated as he was at the remarks which were made at her expense, he was only the more inclined to blame the absurdity by which she had brought them on herself—choosing to stand like St. Simeon Stylites on her self-chosen pillar. His friends, on their part, somewhat naturally complained that it was impossible for them to tell what attitude to take in the matter.

Eva Capern was having recourse to compromise as usual; Eva angry, nervously fidgetty, and wishing with all her heart that she

could have managed to get away before there was time for the storm to break, tried to say boldly that nothing was the matter.

Some of the women were shocked, others had a perplexed air; some laughed in their own bedrooms and said that these sort of things always happened to those of their sex who pretended to keep up a higher standard than their neighbours.

Others were a little pale and agitated, but all were ready with their opinions and surmises, whilst in all the bedrooms was the scurry of hurried packing up.

But nearly all in turns came to Mrs. Capern. "Dear Mrs. Capern, can *you* explain? What does it all mean? Such things as this really don't happen in our world."

"You are right—*cela ne se fait pas*—Mrs. Layton is only a little unconventional," said

Eva speaking in spite of herself in a voice which was a trifle unsteady.

Here was a roof which she had wanted to feel sure of having over her head always in an emergency, and her wits must not desert her.

What was the use? she asked herself, when all was said. Why should she mind being thrown off her guard and tempted to satisfy these women's easily-stirred curiosity?

After all she knew little herself, but there was an eager glitter in the eyes of some of her questioners which for once almost sickened her, and she found it hard to answer them with suavity.

When she made the best of it they only shrugged their shoulders, reminding themselves that Mrs. Capern was Zina Layton's friend, and that friends were always expected to say

that sort of thing, however bad they might know the case to be.

After a time Eva's prudence relaxed and she could not resist making little confidences in private and these confidences were more or less to her friend's discredit. She intended to say nothing unkind on the score of discreet friendship; but there were times when supposed secrets leaked from her dainty lips, as they do from the lips of the majority of women.

Otherwise, to do her justice, she laughed and talked her brightest, after Zina's sudden departure, as a means of diverting suspicion.

It was long since she had ceased to hope that the case would admit of arbitration, or that George Layton would allow her to speak to him about it.

But this sullen mood of his in which everyone felt it awkward to be expected to show just

the right amount of sympathy which might not involve condolence, only made the tongues wag more loudly as the packing went on in the different rooms.

A woman who looked like a picture as she sat at the head of the table and outshone her various guests, was not likely to meet with much mercy at the hands of her own sex.

Sometimes, they remembered, she would sit at the table and look at them as if she did not see them, or saw beyond them, and for that they did not forgive her. They were antipathetic to her, and she had not hesitated to let them see it; a woman who could only make herself thoroughly agreeable to what fitted into her own temperament was not likely to be popular.

And so, from the very house in which

they had been entertained, various versions of the story filtered, maddening Layton when he heard of them.

No one had any pity on Zina. What could you expect? they asked. She had been brought up as an artist, and it was almost always the same miserable story with these sort of people who had to work in a public way to get their own bread.

"Bred in the bone, you see!" they quoted with solemn shakes of the head, which horrified Mrs. Grundy and was intended to horrify her—"there were a good many queer stories afloat about the girl and her father before the marriage, and as to the mother—the mere riff-raff of the streets—he had her educated, you know; but think of the influence!

"What could you expect?" asked the gossips, dropping their voices as they discoursed with scraps of learning about heredity.

When George Layton heard of it he compared his friends of the other sex to a lot of "cats" in his disgust; but cats or not, their claws did not scratch *him*; they were wrapped in velvet whenever they came near him.

He knew that his wife had offended them, that she had paid them the ill compliment of evidently not enjoying herself when she was in their company, and that she had treated them in the same high-handed way in which she had treated himself, leaving him because she would not give in to the empty falsehoods required to keep up appearances.

It was unheard of and not of this world.

And yet he was generous enough to recognise that she was sacrificing herself to take on her own shoulders the duties which he had left undone. A woman touched so easily by the pain of others and moved to such

self-denying charity—a case like this had never hitherto come to his cognisance!

He tried not to think too much about it, as he waited for the progress of time which was to waft her back to his feet like seaweed or driftwood cast up by the waves.

He persuaded himself that it could only be a question of time, that he would rule this woman as he had ruled others of her sex.

For a little while indeed, after he had first met her, he had known regret, sorrow for wasted opportunities and for lost ideals. But then he had found the conquest comparatively easy, and it soon became natural to him, in accordance with the whole method of his life, to determine to bend her will to his, instead of raising himself up to her.

There had been days indeed when he had even taken himself to task for the mad

impulse which determined him to marry this woman. But now that he continued to miss her and to long for her coming back, a sort of shame came over him, and the immense self-esteem which he had managed to hide under a nonchalant manner, was for the first time shaken.

Still he argued that had he told her the story himself, instead of allowing her to find it out and so get the first word, he could have explained it in such a way as to vindicate his honour.

Men like himself could plead the intensity of their vitality, and their warmth of passion which should cover a multitude of minor sins. Still he scarcely wished to see the look again which he could never forget in those great agonised dark-lashed eyes of hers—eyes which condemned and which searched him

through and through, lit from the fire of anguish which flamed in her soul.

Women took a little while to get over scenes like *that*, and possibly absence for a short time might not be unbeneficial; meanwhile he could not sleep, and he had recourse first of all to increased quantities of alcohol and next to doses of opium.

He had tried to comfort himself when first Zina left him by imagining that he should be more at ease, and independent—not being the first man who had made the experiment of matrimony and afterwards suspected that bachelor comfort might be best after all.

But though at first when they were alone together, he had been conscious of a curious sort of relief when he could lock the door of his private apartments and feel that the demands made upon him by a high-pressure

life were withdrawn for a time; though his wife's ideals were so different from the Rochefoucauldian maxims he had adopted for himself, there were days when he felt now that it would have been infinitely better to have been confronted by her scorn, rather than left to himself.

He did not like to face his friends in London, and the zest for travelling seemed to have been blunted; but the loneliness of his country life was hard on him. He began to be more and more nervous.

The continual suffering which he had tried to defy, the aching sense of humiliation, the desire which he could not satisfy, and the wild hope tearing at his heart that some time or other his wife would come back as quietly as she had gone, were wearing him day by day.

He had not the panacea of work, as Zina had, to help him to defy his grief; the opium was telling on him and he was beginning to succumb.

Even the closing of a door echoed with a muffled sound, reverberating through the desolate house to a fancy which had never before been distempered.

He was ill, and needed a doctor, but there was no one to nurse him, and he began to wonder how he should endure his lonely life—how get through that arid, dry period of uninteresting middle age, which is the dullest and dreariest period of existence.

He had always pitied those poor wretches who were hampered by middle-age cares, and crushed by the narrowing influences of everyday worries or straitened circumstances, but he pitied them no longer. To have other people to

care for would be something—it might mitigate the boredom.

And then at last the news reached him that his wife had attained success, but that in this success she was braving him, exhibiting pictures under her maiden name.

She had not even taken the precaution to hide her whereabouts from him.

It was more than human nature could stand. He had not outraged her in any way or lost his legal rights; the utmost he had done was to force things on her contrary to her tastes, but he had never lifted his hand against her, never been cruel to her in any way, and the law was on his side; he would oblige her to return to him.

His desire to regain possession of her was suddenly inflamed by the fact that other men had learnt to notice and appreciate her.

"She is playing the fool with me," he said, laughing contemptuously at the idea that he should have any difficulty in his quest, when one afternoon he found his way to her studio, his features peaked and almost haggard, the external crust of the bodily frame wearing out with the internal conflict of the last few months.

It was a nervous impulse which brought him to the studio, for he knew that no good could come from recrimination, and he had never had any intention of resorting to force.

The profound dejection out of which he could not reason himself was increased by the conviction that Zina would probably not deny herself when he insisted on seeing her, but that every interview with her would be a new disappointment, only bringing fresh suffering on both of them.

For his wife was not a woman like the

generality of women, so weak as to be for ever yielding to the touch of circumstances.

It was a bitter knowledge to him that she had been in the right, and that the tragedy might have been averted which still threatened to spoil two lives if he had been a little less reckless of consequences.

He did not understand that it was the egotism which made him see everything through coloured glasses of his own which had helped him to throw off galling recollections as if they had been old clothes.

He shifted the blame on the wrong shoulders and with a sort of contemptuous self-mockery, was ready to cry, with his next breath, "What a demon the woman is!— Why could she not let bygones be bygones?"

He was expecting to find her in the room alone, as he reeled into it like a drunken man,

worn and haggard-looking with a curious glitter in his eye. And then he stood arrested, drawing a deep breath. For nobody was in the room, though he had thought to surprise his wife, and had been told that she would always be in at this hour.

He took in at one glance the efforts she had made to beautify the place at small expense, the ferns, the fan palms, the plaster casts, the wet canvases, and the frescoes she had roughly drawn on an expanse of stuccoed wall; and then his eyes were attracted by the picture on the easel.

It was a subject to which he had more than once expressed an aversion, and the last which he supposed she would attempt, when she had to devote herself to an art by which she had to get her living. It was large in size and very carefully painted. The face was emaciated, but

it was not the face of an ascetic, weary with the conflict of the flesh and the spirit. It was the realisation of all that was highest.

Perfect purity shone from it, and there was such a concentration of feeling, such an intensity of yearning in the eyes, that he found it impossible to escape from them in any part of the room.

"I will sit down," he thought to himself, "and wait till she comes back. From all that they have told me she cannot be long now."

He sat down and lit a cigar; he hoped it would steady his nerves. Then he threw the cigar down and began to walk with restless step up and down the studio.

Finally he drew a small silver flask, cunningly fashioned, out of his pocket, and poured out a few drops from it, hoping it might rekindle his energy and confidence.

But the native manhood on which he prided himself seemed to have gone out of him.

What could possess him that he was unable to turn his eyes from the canvas, or—to put it in another way—that the eyes of the picture seemed to follow him as if they had independent existence and would not let him rest?

He took out a handkerchief and began to mop his forehead, and hummed a merry tune from one of the last burlesques.

Still he seemed to be impelled as by some irresistible fascination to glance again at the easel. The eyes of the picture were looking at him in such a way that he felt it more impossible to escape from them than ever. He was uncomfortably aware of a concentration of expression in them almost amounting to magnetism, which seemed to force him to meet them whether he would or not.

CHAPTER XIX.

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE.

THERE seemed to be an easy means of getting rid of the uncomfortable idea, by looking at the other sketches which his wife would be preparing for exhibitions. He had heard much of these sketches as of vivid recollections of that Nature which was always true and living to Zina, and of which, even when they had been together in Switzerland, she had tried to seize the impression.

He made up his mind that, under the cir-

cumstances, he could not do better than amuse himself with these until the artist returned.

But Zina had lately cared little about these sketches; she had not painted them with the poignant emotions which threatened to rend and tear her; she had not been deprived of sleep by thinking of them. Since she had sent Stephen Dewe away these smaller pictures had become of less and less consequence to her.

It mattered little to her if they were skyed or if they were abused by the critics; they were only ideas which she had to get rid of in order to devote herself to the grander work which the critics would never see. And she had latterly fallen into the habit of putting them all away that they might not interfere with the effect of that larger work on the easel.

For, once again, she had been concentrating all her efforts on the subject which haunted her, once again the little miseries of life had ceased to torment; she was lost in her work, she *saw* her subject as if the veil had been again removed from her eyes. During the last few days when she had been putting fresh touches to it she had seemed to see everything else through a mist, so intent was she on the picture.

It seemed to her dry and cold, now that it was so nearly completed, compared with the idea which had been so clearly in her head.

Other things which she had despised had been more or less pretentious; but *this* was not. It was living, breathing; the lips seemed to open to speak; its purity was rebuking and yet it was not sentimental—or effeminate.

The *ewig weibliche* was another thing; George Layton did not undervalue it though he had so often been ready to lower womanhood and fling its glory in the dust. But this was manly, and more than manly; its manliness and its purity seemed to reproach him; he began to feel as if he could not breathe in its presence.

Pshaw! it was not possible that this could be the work of his wife. Her imagination, as he remembered, always ran away with her; she could always picture extraordinary things.

And yet she was one whose study of *technique* might be improved, and she would never have pretended in former days to think she could reach the highest walks of art, though she conceived her subjects in an original manner, painting as if she felt them.

This could scarcely be her work! Yet he

felt that if it was, it was a revelation of what she had suffered.

In the picture before him it was as if the hidden depths of her nature were revealed; her rebellion against the world, her despair, her prostration.

She had not wanted anything that was hackneyed, sophisticated, or untrue, but something which was real, which had permeated her whole being with the sense of its reality, though others might call it absurd.

There was pain in the picture, but not pain that was painted physiologically, pain which the artist must have felt herself, and which somehow, very oddly, *he* began to feel.

He did not know why, it was probably merely a sensation. He did not wish to probe into the hidden depths of his own consciousness; all such maudlin self-analysis had been

abandoned long ago and he resented sentimental talk about the beauty of suffering, just as he resented that foolish mediæval worship of pain.

And yet in the presence of this picture it was certain that he suffered.

He took the flask again from his pocket hoping to steady his nerves.

He could see nothing but mawkish sentiment in the Raphaels, and had no fancy for the colouring of Titian. He condemned the flesh painting of Rubens as coarse, and turned from the comfortable looking Madonnas of Murillo, condemning the monotony in such pictures as wearisome and unreal.

Yet all were immeasurably superior in *technique* and handling to the picture before him, which he tried to condemn facetiously as the mere daub of an inexperienced woman.

Why therefore should it trouble him? Why should this inexperienced woman have been able to put all recollection of these other tremendous artists out of her memory? She had not all the secrets which they had for rendering the texture of the skin or the colouring of the garments.

And yet somehow there was a reality about those threadbare garments, worn and old with the action of the weather. The whole experience was not canny; it was scarcely human.

It made him more and more nervous, and it gave him odd ideas which no sacred picture had ever given him before.

The events of his past life were striking him in a new light, as if Powers which he had hitherto ignored or considered as purely benevolent and indulgent to the errors of creatures who were mortal, might possibly

prove to be awful, condemnatory, non-exonerating.

That any such Power should be interested in his character seemed to him a thing ridiculous.

He got up again and paced the room. It was positively absurd that new and bothering thoughts about the problem of existence should suddenly force themselves upon him.

All these things, as he repeated to himself, where purely conventional—the world might make its own laws—conventions for the good of the race to be broken in exceptional cases. Possibly if he had his life to go over again a few of the cases in which he had been a law into himself might have been altered, but, after all was said, these exceptions could be put on one side as things that were regrettable and could be excused on the score of youth.

It was the height of absurdity that such little slips should be brought back to his memory, recurring to him again and again like the tiresome iteration of a tinkling bell.

He had attempted to silence the tinkling by that effort of will which he had exercised all his life—a masterful effort to put away from him anything uncomfortable.

But the tiresome iteration was becoming a sort of clamouring which deafened the common-sense on which he had hitherto prided himself. It even seemed to be taking an independent voice as if determined to blurt out things in the silence of the studio.

He felt inclined to shout back at it, to terrify it into disappearing, and to inform it with a mocking laugh that all such things were bogies, fit only to scare women and children.

Then he was astonished to find himself

arguing. Was it *his* fault if he had been born with a certain temperament, for which the formation of his skull and the convolutions of his brain could alone be held responsible?

He reminded himself that character was destiny as he sat in the darkness of the room, dropping his face upon his hands, and trying in vain to emerge from this labyrinth of thought.

Then he had an odd sensation as if he were attempting to hoodwink himself, and he made one more attempt to be master of the situation, telling himself that it was downright droll, this new conceit for reviewing, as if he were a drowning man, the various episodes of his past life; when, if it were all to come over again, everything sinister would probably be enacted in precisely the same fashion—he probably would not be able to help it.

That he should feel as he did at present

was a proof, that he had been shaken by all the troubles which had happened to him, yet it was childish to allow these speculations to engross him.

He got up once more and walked deliberately towards the picture, with the sudden intention of turning it round so that the eyes should no longer confront him.

As he began to move it, a little piece of sketching canvas which had been carefully concealed behind it fluttered down and fell on the floor.

He took it up and examined it. It was merely a rough sketch—done with few touches in the French impressionist style—a pillow—a part of a bed, and then—two faces.

One was the face of a dying woman with pleading eyes, sunken in their orbits and seeming to gaze from a distance—with dishevelled

golden hair spread over the pillow, and shadowy hands stretched out as if to emphasize her piteous request, whilst crawling on the bed by her side and resting its dimpled cheek on its mother's thin one was a little innocent fair-haired child.

He threw the sketch down as if it had stung him, and swore aloud.

Was it some overmastering instinct which had compelled his wife to record this haunting memory, so truthful in the likeness, so harrowing in the expression of the yearning eyes and then to hide it away where no one would ever find it behind the tender reproachful face of the Christ?

He could not tell—he could not think, but queer ideas of independent existence, which seemed to take form and become visible—with an odd resemblance to the bacteria of physical

disease, which he had seen magnified and recorded on paper--were somehow chasing each other in his brain. They tumbled about and confused him, challenging him to catch them and jarring with each other.

He breathed heavily and longed for air. One of the windows was open; he staggered to it and put his head out gasping for breath, remaining there till the darkness began to fall, and then the nervousness became so intolerable that it was impossible for him to stay in the room.

He felt that if he were to encounter his wife for the first time in the presence of this painting he should be unable to speak to her with proper energy.

But as he got up to leave he determined to adopt another cue in speaking of Zina. He would call her scatter-brained and even mad.

He was not sure that he himself was not beginning to be a little mad as he staggered out of the room, conscious of a second self which seemed strangely to sympathise with his wife's wildest aspirations, her enthusiasms, her exaggerations—a second self which was a disapproving and impassive spectator of the conduct of his first self.

This again was a little crazy; it reminded him of De Marsay in Balzac's novel.

"A second self? what is that but another sort of conscience?" he asked with a feeble attempt to keep up his former sneers at conscience, "which is a mere matter of education, dependent on climate."

He had always been a proud man, if not a vain one, but he was suddenly ashamed of this characteristic, when the vanity which had hitherto been a low one was transformed to

a higher platform. He suffered for the first time from the knowledge of his baseness.

That evening when Zina re-entered her studio and heard that George Layton had been there waiting for her more than an hour, she gave an exclamation of despair, her arms falling by her side.

What had she in her life still which it was possible for him to take away from her? Her absolute independence, her liberty to come and go, how long would he leave her this?

"He cannot force me to go back to him without appealing to the law, and he will not do that; he is too proud," she thought, unable for the whole of the next day to settle down to her work, but wandering about, or walking up and down the rooms, as had been her habit once before in the perplexities of her earlier youth.

About a week afterwards she came to Mary, holding a telegram in her hand, "Eva has written to me," she said, "I ought to have told you before. George Layton is seriously ill—they think he is dying."

Mary could not see the face which was turned away from her with the eyes closed to hide the fact that Zina had been weeping bitterly. She was trying if possible to keep back the tears.

"Do not be afraid," said Mary in her confident way. "He will not die yet—he has too much to learn."

"I said that nothing would make me go to him—unless he were on his death-bed—but I cannot keep away now. I should reproach myself if I did. Yet if I thought they were playing me a trick," cried Zina passionately, speaking in an altered voice, with her face still turned from the light.

“They would not dare to do that,” answered Mary.

One sight of the sick man, unconscious and raving in delirium, proved that whatever else Eva might have been guilty of in her desire to patch up matters, this was no trick.

It was nothing but the old story, a finale which any one with a particle of common-sense might easily have predicted.

For George Layton, who had been neglecting his health during the excitement and mortification of the last few months, and who for some time past had been in the habit of drugging himself because he was sleepless with anxiety, had hurried home feeling more unwell than usual after his visit to his wife's studio, and had taken during the next day or two, long lonely walks in wet weather without changing his clothes on his return. A cold had settled on his lungs,

and before he could be persuaded to send for medical aid he had been suffering from pleurisy.

He prided himself on never having been ill in his life and would not acknowledge that he was so, even when almost unconscious.

He had struggled against circumstances, ashamed of the visions which came to him when he tossed from side to side of his bed, complaining of his inability to sleep, but the delirium had set in before Zina heard of his illness.

To listen to his self-accusing ravings was one of the most terrible penances which could have been inflicted on her.

But if she drew back with a determination not to pry into his secrets, and to hear as little as she could, we will also draw back. For if it is the duty of the story-teller to moralise as little as possible, feeling sure that the exhibition of life as it is will preach most eloquently for

itself, it is equally his duty to draw a veil of compassion over those remorseful agonies of a soul which should be unveiled only to the Creator.

Zina only became conscious as the time passed on of those hundreds of impulses to be unselfish and noble which had come to Layton as to other men. And though they might seem to have departed and left no trace behind, in reality they were yet there.

"He is a hard bad man," she had said to herself, but as she heard him in his wanderings she thought "he is not all bad."

For at one time he murmured of spring flowers, and at another of the long hours of a tortured conscience during sleepless nights, worse than the agonies described by Dante.

At one time he would call upon Agnes and reproach her for not having told him all the truth

about herself, and at another he accused himself of having her murder at his door.

At one time he fancied himself at Florence meeting first of all with Zina, and at another in Switzerland with the blossoms on the trees stooping to meet the blossoms on the grass.

“You were confiding, but you had relations; they should have helped you to make inquiries,” he muttered as he tossed to and fro on his pillows.

And then again, “*How* could you imagine I meant to do you so great a wrong, or that you would take it so much to heart?”

Many facts which he had hitherto forgotten came back to his memory, and on those occasions when Zina could not tell how much was true, or how much conjured up by his diseased bodily condition she would put her hands to her ears, and fall on her knees beside the bed.

She had been so little used to prayer, that she could not tell if this were praying.

At any rate it was an effort to trust her own future and that of the man who was suffering also to the magic of a Love which had power to cast out devils.

She did not venture even to wish that the cup of suffering should be immediately taken away from either of them, for the problem of pain was beginning to be better understood by her, and she saw for the first time how the tragic messenger of sorrow, which had come to her in varying forms at different periods of her life, might have been, after all, an angel in disguise.

Her mental effort as she knelt was to put personal wishes on one side, to seek to have herself purged from egotism or passionate desire, and to be swayed only by that Love, which

was struggling against the armies of evil, defeating and expelling, whilst it strengthened the impoverished will.

She trembled as she listened to the sick man's mutterings, conscious as she was of misgivings as to what he might say, and yet determined never again to ply him with questions.

Who was she to judge him? She had not as yet ventured to call herself a Christian, but she was logical enough to see that if she changed her independent idealism for the idealism of Christianity no plea could go forth from her for release from the life-long vow—even if it were “for worse.”

Her sense of paralysis in dealing with these difficulties did not prevent her from effectually aiding the nurses in making vehement efforts for his recovery.

The more she concentrated her attention on

dealing with the physical disease the less time had she for tormenting herself with all sorts of surmises. And her sympathy in this respect was so great that, as his breathing grew deeper and feebler, a slight tremor seemed to shake her own delicate frame, and her own breathing grew correspondingly troubled.

On the first day when he was perceptibly better she sat perfectly still behind the curtain hoping that he would not notice her.

But the depths of her dark eyes glittered when the physician came and went, reporting favourably on the case.

The first time that the invalid recognised her she was standing over him with a cup. Her smile was a little subdued, but she did not start or turn away from him.

He had passed through a fiery ordeal of suffering, which was so far well for him that it

might point the way through unselfishness to a higher life.

She, too, had suffered, and she could be sorry for him. The Pharisaic spirit, if she had ever had it, was entirely beaten out of her. Nature seemed to have taken its revenge on her, and she was conscious that she was no better than other women.

"I ought to be sorry for you," she said, a few days afterwards, when, in the weariness of convalescence, he was lamenting his disinclination to take up the old threads of life again with the same surroundings, "I ought to be sorry because you are unhappy, and I have been terribly unhappy myself. Who am I, to take it upon me bitterly to condemn?"

But when he suggested that in America or Australia one might turn over a new page in existence, unsullied by memories of

the past, and when he looked at her inquiringly, she only assented to the fact. "That is true," she said, "it may be as well to make a break."

"If only for a time?" he added, tentatively, and was a little surprised when she answered:

"That will be a good plan. It is what we both want—a little time."

He went. But she did not offer to go with him. She had nursed him when he was ill and made no parade of her nursing. But it seemed to be all she was capable of—*just then*.

"For better, for worse." She had rebelled in passionate horror like many another woman against the hopeless wreck of all human happiness which had seemed to be involved in the binding together of two souls so differently constituted in an indissoluble tie from which death only could free her.

But she was awake now; she had been dreaming then. Paradoxical as it might sound, she had been wakened by a dream. And she had learnt to see that there are questions of more importance than personal pain.

All thoughts of meting out judgment to a fellow-creature had ceased. Yet something had gone out of her, which no power of the man who still loved her would ever be able to restore.

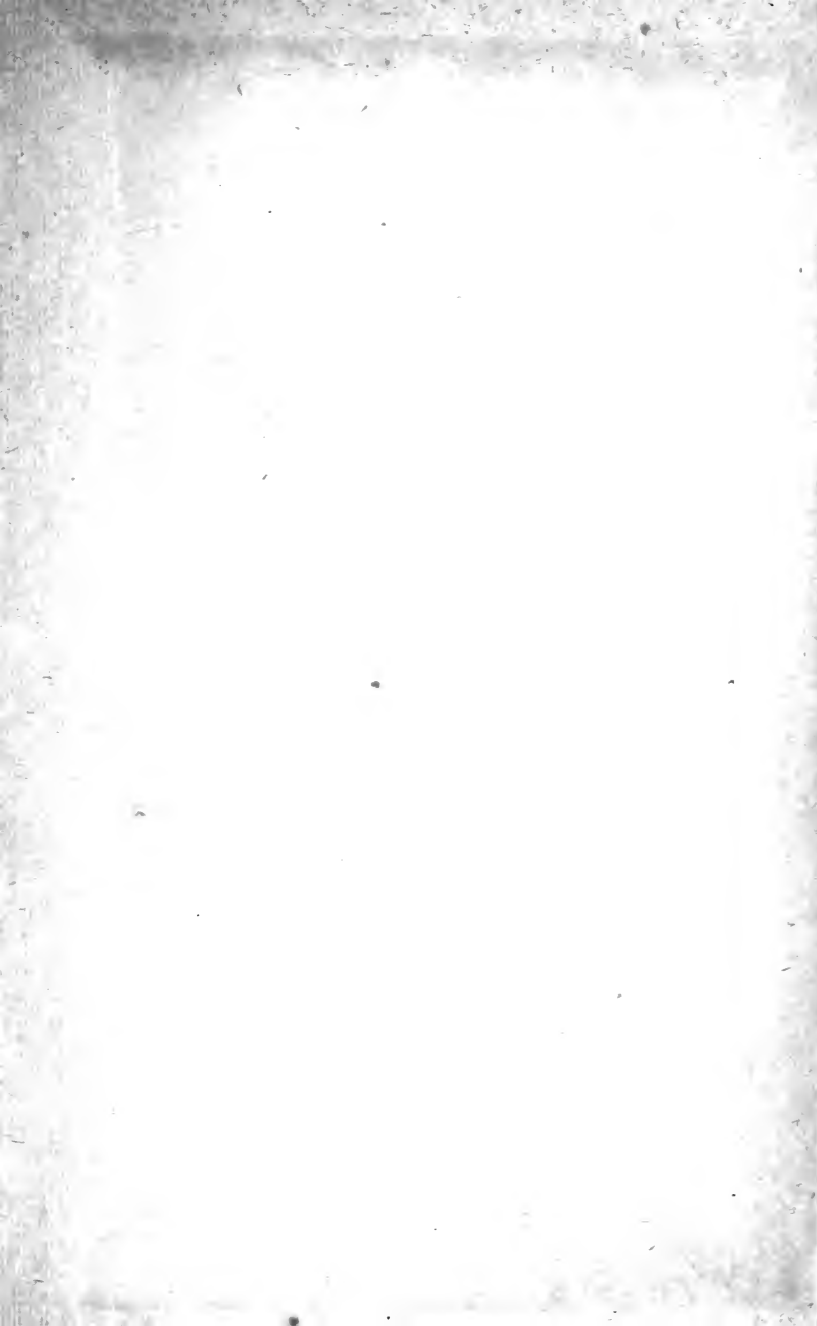
It was heartrending, for when she searched to the very roots of her life, she found that the dead ashes of it remained—nothing more.

As the Germans say, *hin ist hin*.

THE END.







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